

This fan fiction work is set between the 6th and 7th years of Harry's time at Hogwarts. The war is at full strength now and, hoping to turn the tide against Voldemort, Dumbledore has concocted a plan.

Of course, most of these characters were created by J.K. Rowling and I hope that I treat them with the great respect that they deserve.

I would appreciate everyone's comments and reviews. I will be posting chapters every 2-3 days because most of the story is already written so it is just a matter of formatting it and loading it. Hope you all enjoy the story.

## Chapter 1

### The Plan

"So I'm dead."

"Yes. At least everyone thinks so. I moved quickly to get things arranged . . ."

Harry looked without comment at his Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, as he elaborated on how quickly he had taken advantage of the chance to make everyone, especially Lord Voldemort, think he had been killed at their last meeting.

Except for some mild stiffness in his shoulder and a nagging ache in his knee, Harry had actually not felt this well in quite some time. He had realized over the last few years that the scar on his forehead that used to only mark him as a survivor of Lord Voldemort's attempt on his life almost 16 years ago was also an indicator of the evil lord's moods and actions. This could be helpful at times but Harry basically had pain along that scar constantly, ranging in level from mildly prickly to head-splitting agony. Now, he felt nothing there and instinctively he reached up and rubbed the familiar lightning-shaped scar to make sure it was still there. It was.

Harry had met Lord Voldemort again in another battle just last night. Due to Harry's being distracted by one of the Death Eaters, Voldemort had hit Harry with a spell that knocked him unconscious

and also broke his collarbone. Harry assumed that Moody, who was there with him, had managed to get him away before Voldemort could finish him off but he did not really understand exactly the chain of events that had landed him in the seriously wounded ward on the fourth floor of St. Mungo's Hospital. All he knew was what had happened since he had regained consciousness two hours ago. He knew it, but he was still absorbing it, trying to fit it all into some pattern that would make sense. He had woken but almost before he opened his eyes, Dumbledore had whisked him out of the ward using a portkey (Harry could have sworn it was a bedpan but did not really think he wanted to know) and they had both landed with a resounding thud on an empty train station platform. It took Harry a moment to recognize the familiar platform without the Hogwarts Express standing ready to go, but before he could really take in the surroundings of platform 9 3/4, they had passed through the barrier and were striding quickly out of the station and onto an Underground train. Harry knew that he was currently in a suburb of London, but was not quite oriented enough to know where.

Dumbledore was looking at him as though expecting an answer to a question, but Harry had not heard it, so he just made a non-committal grunting noise, but Dumbledore just smiled patiently at him. "Harry, I need to set the password. What do you want it to be?" Harry was confused. "If the Fidelius charm has been set on the house, why do I need a password?"

"Harry, I want multiple layers of protection around you, even here in the Muggle world. Something may happen. We just cannot take any chances."

"How can I have a portrait on my front door to take the password?" Harry felt stupid, like he had missed some vital part of the conversation, but did not want to admit that he had no clue exactly what was going on. He vaguely heard Dumbledore say something about an enchanted doorbell but got lost in thought again.

Dumbledore had explained briefly as they had walked the long distance from the Underground station to this house that he had told everyone in the hospital that Harry had died from his injuries and that this news was now plastered all over the front page of a special

edition of the Daily Prophet and was being carried by owls to everyone in the wizarding world. Dumbledore had further explained at Harry's shocked expression that he was hoping that if Voldemort thought he had succeeded in killing off his enemy at last that he would make some foolish movement in the ongoing war and the Order of the Phoenix could maneuver him into a corner. "Then, suddenly, you are back, Harry, back and as strong as ever. If things go as I think they will, it will be a death blow to his forces. Yes, Harry, a death blow. We should be able to finally win this war. If things go as I think they will."

Harry thought this plan was pretty good, actually, although the thought of living back in the Muggle world for as long as two months was a little depressing. Harry had been raised as a Muggle until his 11th birthday but he had not found it very pleasant. His summer-time visits to his Muggle relatives had certainly not done anything to change his opinion. Dumbledore had told him that things might move faster than this and it could be as little as two weeks before he came back to get him, but Harry thought if he planned on two months and then it was shorter, it would be a pleasant surprise.

"Sir Cadogan." Harry finally said to Dumbledore. "The password can be Sir Cadogan."

## Chapter 2

### Alone, again

It was getting dark now and Harry was still sitting in the rather uncomfortable armchair where he had sat ever since Dumbledore had left three hours ago, ambling down the street looking for all the world like an old Muggle out for an evening constitutional.

The list of instructions had been fairly long and Harry hoped that he had absorbed enough into his already over-saturated brain that he would not overlook some vital key and wind up ruining the entire plan.

"No magic." That had been repeated often enough that Harry had finally said, "I know, Professor. No magic. At all. Period. End of sentence. No magic." Harry was very surprised, then, when Dumbledore had pulled his old trusty Phoenix-feather core wand out of his inner pocket. "Just in case," Dumbledore had said. "If your life is in eminent danger and only if it is. After all, there is no point in worrying about you being found if the alternative is that you are dead. Keep your wand with you at all times, Harry. You could have trouble anytime you are out of this house. If you were to run into a wizard who recognized you . . . Well, it wouldn't take long to bring the enemy down on you." Dumbledore went on to explain that he had told Ron and Hermione that the wand had been destroyed in the same battle where Harry had "died" and that they seemed to accept that, even though they were very upset about not having even that small memento of their best friend.

That comment had probably caused Harry the most distress of the entire conversation. He had, up to that point, assumed that Ron and Hermione at least would know that he really was not dead. But Dumbledore had told him that it was necessary that everyone, absolutely everyone, except for he himself, think that Harry was dead. "Let's face facts, Harry. When two people know something, it is no longer a secret. There is just too much risk that something, anything, could give away the game. The survival of the entire wizarding world could depend on this secret, Harry. They have to think you are gone, just like everyone else." Harry had a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach, imagining himself thinking that Ron was dead, or Hermione.

He knew how bad they would feel and yet he couldn't do anything to make it better right now. He hoped, that somehow, when the whole plot was revealed, they would be able to forgive him.

He reached over to a nearby lamp and turned the knob, lighting the corner where he sat with a dim yellow glow. He had to pull himself together. He was a 16-year-old boy and he needed to take care of some basic realities. First of all, he had no food in the house, no clothes except for what he had on, and absolutely no clue what he was going to do next.

## Chapter 3

### The Meeting

Harry stood in the frozen food section of a market he had come across only five blocks from his new temporary home. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt that Dumbledore had provided until he could buy some new clothes. He had worn these the summer before while living with the Dursley's, as they certainly would not allow him to wear the more standard wizard robes while living in their household. The clothes were too small for him now by about two sizes and he was a little worried about the shirt rising up and showing the narrow strip of wood he had shoved into the front part of his jeans, against his skin. Anyone with any connection to magic would immediately recognize it as a wand and he hoped no Muggles would get curious about why he had what looked like a shiny stick shoved into the front of his jeans. He had laughed to himself earlier as he had tucked it down into the waistband of his pants, remembering how Moody had warned him that wearing his wand like that could blast off one of his buttocks. Of course, now it was in the front . . . he supposed his buttocks, at least, were safe. Harry was going to go shopping for some larger clothes later today, but he had to worry about breakfast first . . . and lunch . . . and dinner. At least money was not an issue. Dumbledore had left him a significant stash of funds and Harry figured that he could just about buy anything that he needed without worrying about running out of money, so he could get plenty of food, if he just knew what to buy.

Harry had felt fairly grown up in the last year at Hogwarts, his sixth. He had learned all sorts of new magic, no small part due to the special classes he was taking with Professor McGonagall and Professor Lupin at night and on the weekends. Mad-Eye Moody, an ex-Auror, had taught him lots of defensive maneuvers and although Harry did not like to say this out loud, he knew that most people were very impressed at the advanced skills he had mastered. He technically could take his examination to apparate within the next six weeks although with everything else going on, he doubted he would have the chance to make an appointment with the witch over that particular section of the Ministry of Magic. And then, of course, there was the fact that most people in the wizarding world looked to him as

the leader of the anti-Voldemort forces and that Dumbledore and he often planned the next battle's strategy together. So, all this combined led to Harry feeling almost like an adult although he knew it would be at least another year before he could officially leave school and begin focusing on a career.

But standing here, staring at the rows of brightly colored boxes behind the glass doors, Harry felt about 10 years old. He realized with a sudden start that he would have been 10 the last time he set foot in a Muggle supermarket and at that time he had had no concept of how to shop for groceries. And he had learned absolutely nothing about it since. "Well," he muttered under his breath, "Standing here isn't going to get my breakfast cooked." He pushed his cart forward, further into the section that held the frozen meals. He had two packages of bacon in his cart along with an inexpensive frying pan to cook it in. He did know how to cook bacon - that lesson had been drilled into him over the course of many mornings of cooking breakfast for the Dursley's with Aunt Petunia looking over his shoulder. And even though bacon sounded good for today's breakfast, he knew that when lunch rolled around he would probably want something a little more substantial.

There were a couple of frozen dinners that looked edible and Harry had just opened the freezer door and reached in to grab them when someone behind him said, "You don't want to do that!" Harry stopped mid-reach, his heart racing. He turned slowly. Were they talking to him? He hoped not. As he turned, his green eyes met the bluest pair of eyes he had ever seen. They were up very close to his and he instinctively backed up, hitting his head on the metal shelf of the grocer's freezer. He would have reached down for his wand but his arm was trapped over his head by the door as he hadn't dared lower his hand at the insistent command. The blue eyes were sparkling with what Harry thought was laughter. He relaxed a little as the eyes backed up, and the same voice said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you but you really don't want to buy those."

"Buy what?" Harry's voice came out more like a croak as he stared at the girl. For the eyes did indeed belong to a girl, a girl who was looking at him, smiling. "Those frozen meal-like items," she said.

"Uh, why not?"

"They're disgusting. I know they look okay on the box, but trust me, they're nasty. Plus, they're loaded up with all sorts of fat and cholesterol. You'd do better just to eat straight bacon and eggs." Then she glanced at his cart which had exactly two packages of bacon in it (and the frypan) and said "I guess that isn't a big concern of yours, is it?" and she turned back to look into his eyes again.

Harry, meanwhile, had realized that she wasn't going to attack him and had moved out of the freezer and tried to restore some dignity by pulling down his too-small T-shirt. He had lowered his arm and was trying to maneuver around to shut the door but she was very close to him and he didn't really know how he was going to move her away enough to let the door close without pushing her aside. "Well, no," he said. He wasn't sure exactly what she was on about but that seemed to be the response she wanted.

She realized at that point apparently that the two of them were blocking the freezer door and she moved aside a little so that Harry could maneuver out of the way and with relief let the door shut.

"Are they that bad?" Harry asked. His voice still came out like a croak and he cleared his throat, hoping she had not noticed. "Yeah. They're pretty horrendous, even as frozen dinners go. If you have to eat that kind of junk, you'd be better off with that brand down there, at least." She indicated further down the row. "But you'd be better just cooking your own food."

"I really don't know how to cook," Harry admitted, feeling a little resentful that she was interfering in his shopping. He knew he didn't have any idea what he was doing but didn't like to call attention to the fact, especially to a total stranger.

The girl laughed again, and Harry surprised himself by thinking that he liked hearing her laugh, even if she was laughing at him.



## Chapter 4

Cassie

"Well, you don't have to be a gourmet chef to improve on that," she said, again indicating the frozen meals behind him. "Can you boil water, at least?"

"I think I can handle that much." Harry was quite nervous at talking to this girl. She seemed friendly enough, but Dumbledore had been pretty specific in his instructions the previous night.

"I know it will be difficult, Harry, to be alone for a while, but you just cannot tell by looking who is a Wizard and who isn't. Anyone who has associated with Wizards at all, even if they are Muggle themselves, will recognize your name and your scar. And even if someone gets suspicious at a boy as young as yourself living alone, it could cause all sorts of problems. . . . It will be best if you just avoid as much contact as possible with people, Harry."

Harry had thought at the time that this would not prove difficult at all. He knew no one in London who wasn't a Wizard and in his previous experiences in the Muggle world, he had never had friends. As for his living alone, he decided that if he said he was 17 rather than 16 and that his parents had gone on vacation for a week or two, leaving him alone, that would not seem unusual. He knew that children of 16 or 17 were old enough to live on their own for short periods at least.

So here he was, a mere few hours later, already being approached by someone he did not know. He remembered Moody's motto of "Constant Vigilance" and tried not to relax too much.

"If you can boil water and you have a pan . . . Do you have a pan?" Harry forced his mind back to the girl, who was talking to him although he had not heard what she was saying.

"What?" He wanted to hit himself in the head. So far, he had not exactly been making very brilliant conversation, and although he knew he really should just excuse himself from the situation completely and probably leave the store, he was going to need to eat

something. Maybe she would have some ideas. He knew he sure didn't. If he just didn't let slip anything about himself, he could probably get a few hints. After all, she did not look any older than he was and yet she seemed to have some idea what she was doing.

"I asked if you have a pan . . . You know, to boil water in. Not that frypan that you are buying for your bacon." Harry tried to ignore the disapproval in her voice. It was obvious that she preferred the sort of whole-grain cereal stuff he could see in her own cart.

"No, I don't have anything at all at home. I've got to buy everything I need." She looked at him sideways, curious, obviously. So Harry quickly said, abandoning his thought-out story immediately and improvising on the spot, "I had to move into an apartment rather unexpectedly and there's nothing in it. This is my first place, you see."

"Oh. Well, look. Why don't I take you over to the pasta area and give you a few pointers? Plus, then maybe you can pick up a sauce pan, too." My name's Cassie, by the way. What's yours?"

"Harry." Uh-oh. He didn't dare say Harry Potter, it was just too well-known . . . "Just Harry."

She crooked up an eyebrow at him, a smile hovering around her mouth again, like she was trying really hard not to laugh. "Well, Just Harry, do you like pasta or are you more of a meat and potatoes man?"

"I'll eat anything that I can cook," Harry said, feeling like the world's biggest idiot. "That's kind of why the bacon . . . I can cook it, you see." She nodded. "Come on, Just Harry. Let's go see what we can do for you" and she pushed her cart down the aisle away from him, calling suggestions for possible easy meals over her shoulder as she went. He followed her over to a different area of the supermarket, hoping that he was not getting himself into a terrible bit of trouble with this laughing, chatting girl who really did have the most amazing blue eyes.

## Chapter 5

### 65 Little Chesterton Lane

Harry walked home an hour later juggling three grocery bags that were loaded down with quite a few heavy items including three pans and the makings of several decent-sounding meals. He did not know if after he was finished with the ingredients they would be as tasty as Cassie had made them sound but at least he figured he would probably not starve.

He entered the quiet street where his house was located and walked past the first two houses on the street. He stood between the second and third houses and looked at the empty space between them. Shaking his head in amazement, he set the grocery bags down on the lawn and looked up and down the street. It was definitely deserted, just what he needed. He fished in the pocket of his jeans, a more difficult task than usual as they were extremely snug with the wand and the fact that they were already very small. He pulled out the first piece of paper, no . . . that was Cassie's phone number. His face pinkened slightly. He pulled out the next piece of paper, thicker than the first. Yeah, this was it, the parchment piece that Dumbledore had left with him the night before. He opened it and read the address of the house on it, 65 Little Chesterton Lane. He shouldn't be surprised to see a house suddenly grow in front of him, pushing the two houses to either side out of its path. He shouldn't be surprised because he had seen the house at 12 Grimmauld Place do this two years ago several times, but it always amazed him nonetheless. He gathered up his bags and climbed the front steps, pausing at the door. "Password" the doorbell said to him and Harry said "Sir Cadogan" quickly, anxious to get inside the door and to safety. The doorbell said, as the door swung open on silent hinges, "It's about time you got in, you know. You've been gone too long." Harry rolled his eyes. Just what he needed, a doorbell that dispensed advice about his coming and going.

He locked the door behind him as Dumbledore had instructed. He did not exactly understand how these locks worked but apparently they allowed the house to once again disappear so that the Fidelius charm would be effective. Harry set the bags on the rickety table in the

kitchen. By now, he was starving and thought that if he didn't get his bacon cooked pretty soon, he was going to have to get desperate and actually eat some of the multi-grain cracked wheat sprout type of bread that had somehow mysteriously taken the place of the white bread in his cart as he had pushed it to the check-out stand.

After breakfast, Harry finished putting away the groceries into the small fridge and rather rickety looking cupboards. He took the piece of paper with Cassie's phone number on it out of his pants pocket once again and stuck it to the fridge with a magnet. The note on it was brief: "Call me if you have trouble remembering any of the recipes I gave you."

She had shoved it into his hand as she had left him before he paid for the groceries. She had been pushing her rather overloaded shopping cart out into the parking lot. "My mom will be here any second to pick me up. I've got to run, but here" and then she had been gone. Harry was not sure, looking at the number now, whether he would dare call her or not. There was a phone in the house and he knew that it worked because he had checked last night before he went to bed, just out of curiosity. But he was not sure whether using the phone was a smart idea. He was supposed to be "lying low," pretending to be dead, staying by himself, etc., etc. He was not sure that calling pretty (and she really was, he thought, very pretty) Muggle girls was on the Dumbledore list of approved hiding-out activities. He seriously doubted it. He decided that he would not call her unless he desperately needed her for some really important reason and even then, maybe he would use a payphone down the street rather than risk making the phone call from his "invisible" house.

He left the kitchen and walked into the main room of the house. On the desk, Dumbledore had left him a quill, some ink, and a rather thick stack of parchment, along with some envelopes, before he left the night before. Dumbledore had instructed him that he was to write him every day with a report of his activities (another reason calling Cassie would probably not be a fantastic idea), and mail the letter in the post box at the end of the street.

Harry had visions of sending out letters addressed to "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, somewhere in Scotland," but

Dumbledore had assured him that if the letters just went to this regular Muggle street address, a friend would forward them by special owl post. No reason that Harry had to risk sending anything by owl. "And if I need to speak to you, Harry, I will send Sir Lionel here and he can give you any critical messages." He had then handed Harry a fairly small painting of a dusty-looking old knight who was sleeping away in his frame. "I have had a painting of him installed in my office. To the best of my knowledge, only these two paintings of him exist so no one else will be able to eavesdrop on our conversations." Harry had asked why he could not just send Sir Lionel to Dumbledore rather than work through this convoluted mail and owl system, but Dumbledore had explained that sending a picture to convey a message was a minor bit of magic, but if someone was really looking closely for magic in unexpected places, it might be a tip-off. "Obviously, Harry, if it is an emergency, then go ahead and use Sir Lionel, but make sure that the risk is worth it."

Harry obligingly then wrote the first note to Dumbledore, stuck it in the envelope, stuck a stamp onto it, and put it near the door. He would take it out when he went clothes shopping later. He had not mentioned Cassie. He was not sure why he hadn't. Maybe, he decided, he just didn't want to take a chance that Dumbledore would send back a message telling him that he was never to contact her again. That was a risk that Harry was not quite sure he was willing to take.

## Chapter 6

### The Phone Call

The next four days passed with excruciating slowness for Harry. He had done all the clothes shopping that he had needed to do, cleaned the house several times, and experimented carefully in the kitchen, finding to his surprise that the cooking was not as bad as he had feared. Although he would not dare call himself good at it, he generally found it easier than he had expected and had eaten fairly well, with the exception of one meal that he burned pretty badly when he completely forgot about it being in the oven. But, generally, he was bored, very bored. He had no one to visit with, nothing to really do. He loved to read but did not have a library card. He also seriously doubted that if he went in to apply, they would give him one.

He did not have the option of going out much to either window shop or sit in bookstores or libraries to read books or people-watch or anything. Too dangerous. He would have given just about anything for one of his school books. Even his textbook from Potions, his least favorite subject, would have done something to break the monotony. He had picked up a few best-sellers when he had been out on an errand but found them rather tedious. He was watching a lot of television but in general he could not understand what Dudley had found so engrossing about it. Sure, some shows were pretty good, and he was just learning the character's names and figuring out their rather twisted relationships in a few of the daily serials that he found semi-engrossing. He even spent time one afternoon staring at Sir Lionel silently willing him to wake up, even jostling the frame where he still slept on, snoring loudly. Sir Lionel had moved slightly, but had gone right back to sleep, barely missing a beat in his rhythmic snores.

But, for the most part, he just felt homesick, desperately wanting to return to Hogwarts and his friends. He missed Ron. He missed Hermione. He missed his owl Hedwig. He even in some small corner of his brain missed Draco Malfoy - at least if he was around he would have had someone to exchange insults with. He wondered, in the middle of the night when he was feeling most lonely, if they missed him, too. Maybe, he told himself, they were happy he was dead. Maybe, they hardly noticed that he was no longer around. In the light

of day, he knew these thoughts were foolish, but sitting alone for hours and hours can start to do strange things to your brain. And then he especially missed Quidditch - a sport that he excelled and loved almost more than anything else on earth.

Knowing how exciting it was to watch Quidditch players zoom through the air on their speeding brooms and even more keenly knowing how it felt to be one of those players made almost any Muggle sport boring to watch. Harry tried his best to get involved in a televised soccer game and also valiantly watched four games of cricket, a polo match, and even a fairly interesting game of American football. But try his best, he just could not get too excited. The players seemed hampered by gravity, tied to earth, bound by the limitations of living in the Muggle world. Harry looked at them and saw himself; he found this depressing. He finally gave up watching any sports at all on television. It made him maudlin.

It was the afternoon of the fifth day that he finally ran out of the easy to prepare meals that Cassie had carefully instructed him in fixing. The refrigerator was basically empty and the only thing he had left in the freezer was a roast beef. She had said that he could bake this and eat it for several different meals. At the time, Harry had nodded his head in agreement, for he loved roast beef and the thought of a nice piece with gravy sounded pretty tasty. However, contemplating the frozen chunk of meat sitting in his freezer, trying to picture it later sliced on his plate, Harry decided it was just too much effort. He had no idea how one was supposed to cook a roast beef and the fact that it was presently hard enough to hammer a nail with made it that much more intimidating.

Harry closed the freezer door, deciding that it was time to make another run to the grocery store, when the scrap of paper he had stuck up there on the first day caught his eye. Not that he had forgotten it was there. It had burned itself into his brain and he had the number memorized. Now, however, he realized that he had a good excuse to call her. Maybe she could tell him what to do with this roast. He could go shopping to buy something else. Yes, he could. Or, he could call her. Maybe he could call her on the way to the grocery store. That would mean that he would not be outside more than necessary. Then, she could tell him how to cook the roast. He could

buy stuff for tonight but he would know how to cook the roast for tomorrow. Yes, that would make sense. No one, Harry decided, could fault him for that plan of action.

With slightly shaking hands, Harry took the piece of paper off the fridge and tucked it into the pocket of his jeans. He grabbed his wand and tucked it into his waistband, feeling some nervous quivering in his stomach. He was always nervous when he left the house. It made him vulnerable. He knew that much. But he had to go out for shopping, that could not be denied. He grabbed the scrap of parchment with the address of the house on it and stuffed it into his back pocket. He also grabbed the letter for Dumbledore that he had composed that morning. He pushed down the niggling feeling of guilt that surfaced as he thought of the information he was specifically not including in his daily missive. After all, today's letter was already written and he did not even know if Cassie would be home. He unlocked the door and stepped out onto the steps and down onto the street, watching as the house apparently collapsed on itself and disappeared into nothingness.

The phone box down the street from his house was mercifully empty and Harry stepped into it, carefully shutting the door behind him. He inserted his coins and dialed the now familiar number with hands that shook slightly. He did not know, as he heard the rings on the other end, if he hoped that someone answered or if he hoped that no one did.

"The Robinsons' residence" a deep male voice said after five rings, just as Harry had decided that no one was there.

"Uh, yes. Is Cassie there?" Harry winced at the trembling in his voice. He hoped that it was just from lack of use.

"Hello?" Her voice was bright, happy - just as Harry remembered it from the store.

"Cassie?" "Yes." "This is Harry . . ." he thought quickly, "Harry, from the grocery store the other day."



"Oh!" She sounded surprised but in a good way, like she had just been given an unexpected gift. "I thought . . . Well, I figured you would never call me. I thought, well, I thought I had frightened you away."

"No. I just. . . . The cooking has been going great. But, I . . . Well, the roast is frozen solid and I don't have any idea how to cook it." That wasn't really how Harry wanted to start the conversation. It didn't sound suave and sophisticated. It didn't tell her how lonely he was or how happy he was to hear her voice, or how desperately he wanted to see her smile at him again, or even laugh at him if she wanted, and it didn't tell her how many times he had wanted to call her over the last few days. It didn't tell her any of those things and he groaned inwardly at the complete silence on the other end of the line.

## Chapter 7

### An Invitation

The silence coming through the phone was deafening. Harry wanted to quickly apologize, stammer that he had really called for many other reasons, and beg to see her again, but just as he was about to start talking, he heard Cassie say in the background, "Mum, how would you actually cook a frozen pot roast?" A few moments later, she spoke to him again. "My mum says that it is way too late in the afternoon to be cooking frozen pot roast for dinner." Harry laughed. "Yeah, you're probably right. I wasn't planning on cooking it today, though. I'm headed back to the grocery store, actually, but I thought maybe for tomorrow." His voice trailed off. He desperately wanted to see her again, wanted to ask her to meet him somewhere. He just wanted to have somebody to talk to.

"Do you have anything to do for dinner tonight?" Cassie suddenly asked. Harry was not sure if it was his imagination, but Cassie sounded really nervous. "Um, well, no." He suddenly realized that maybe he should have come up with some pressing engagement.

"Can you come over for dinner? My mum," Cassie rushed on, as though wanting to justify this invitation, "feels bad that you're cooking for yourself every night."

Harry's heart leapt up to his throat. Going to Cassie's for dinner sounded really nice, better than nice, but he knew that this would be foolish. Even to see her again would be asking for trouble. He was positive that Dumbledore would not be happy if he was going around meeting unknown people, sitting down with them, and taking the chance of being recognized. So he said, with real reluctance in his voice, "I can't, Cassie. I'd love to, but I really can't."

"Oh. Well, okay." He could tell she was a little embarrassed, like she wished she hadn't asked in the first place. He said quickly, "I really appreciate the invitation. I do. I just . . . I can't really explain. It's kind of complicated." There was that deafening silence again, and Harry wanted to fill it with some witty comment or something, but he could not think of one. So instead he just said, "Well, look, I've got to get

going. I can't be away too long." He realized he shouldn't have said that. It was sort of a strange comment. He hurried on, wanting to cover up for that mistake. "I've really got to go, Cassie." He wanted to ask if it would be alright if he called again, but he didn't dare.

"All right. Goodbye, Harry." He hung up the phone on his end first, staring out of the phone booth with unfocused eyes. "I blew it," he thought. "I had the possibility of having someone, anyone, that I could talk to, and instead I blew it." He sighed heavily, opening the phone booth's door and stepping back out onto the street. "Maybe it's for the best, though. After all," he thought, "I may not be here for much longer and I'm sure that it's best for me just to stay focused on what I need to do." He couldn't forget that there was a war going on, a war that was determining the fate of the Wizarding world and the Muggle world and he, Harry, was the weapon that could decide which side would be the winner. The last thing he needed was a lot of distractions.

Harry walked quickly down the street the several blocks to the same grocery store where he had shopped before. No one even looked at him twice. The Muggle clothes that he had bought a few days ago were just what all the other people on the street were wearing and with his bangs pulled carefully down over his scar, there was nothing special to set him apart from the other people he was passing. The store was crowded with people picking up last-minute items for their dinners on the way home from work. Harry had not decided whether it was better to try to blend in with a crowd or whether it was best to isolate himself a little to decrease the chance that he would run into someone that had something to do with the Wizarding world. He supposed that either way was risky. He sighed again and started his shopping, trying to remember what he had purchased a few days ago and all the different meals that he had eaten since then.

As he shopped, he kept glancing up at all the people in the store. He had to admit to himself that he was looking for her. Every time someone blonde walked by, his heart leapt, and then would slow again when it was not her. He did not know why he thought she would come again to the store to see him. It was true that he had mentioned that he was coming here, but she may be busy, may be offended at his phone call, may be . . . And then, suddenly, she was

there, smiling at him, her blue eyes maybe a little more clouded than they had been the other day, but smiling her same amazing smile and his heart, which had been feeling heavier with each passing minute, suddenly lightened. He smiled back at her and hoped that he wasn't grinning like an idiot.

"I realized," she said as they stood grinning at each other in the middle of the store's canned fruit aisle, "I never told you how to cook your frozen pot roast." And Harry, who hadn't had anything to laugh about for a very, very long time, laughed with the pure happiness he felt at seeing her.

They would have stood there longer, just staring at each other, but someone was trying to push past him on one side and a little kid had escaped from his mother and was trying to use Harry as a shield as she tried to grab him, and so he pushed his cart over to the side of the aisle while the mother grabbed her escaped toddler and the older shopper who had been muttering under his breath something about "kids getting in the way" pushed on by.

## Chapter 8

### Cassie Asks Questions

Cassie handed Harry a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it, trying without success to wipe the silly smile off his face. The writing was not Cassie's; he was fairly sure that he would recognize her writing now. He had been staring at the note she had written him for five days.

"My mum's instructions for your roast beef," she said.

"Thanks. Tell her I really appreciate her thoughtfulness." Harry really did think that her mum was very nice to go to all that effort for him.

Cassie smiled. "Okay." Harry was not sure what to say next. He wanted to spend time with her, but felt like he could not really ask after declining her dinner invitation. She glanced over at his cart, but didn't say anything.

Harry took a deep breath and said, "I could probably use some help with the shopping again if you have a little bit of time. I can't remember exactly what I bought before and everything turned out pretty well, so I thought maybe I could just do the same thing again."

"So you managed to cook everything all right?" She asked, stepping closer to him trying to get out of the way as two boys of about nine years old started racing up and down the aisle.

"Yes," Harry said, grabbing her as the boys came back on their next lap and seemed to be heading right for her. She stumbled momentarily, falling against him for just a second before righting herself. Harry had two quick thoughts as she stood away from him again. The first was that she smelled really good and the second was that she had undoubtedly felt his wand, which, for lack of a better place, was still shoved into the waistband of his jeans. He grabbed her hand and pulled her and pushed his cart out of the canned fruit aisle which seemed to have turned into a major highway for all the annoying people in the store. He looked at her for a minute as they

stood there, and then dropped her hand, embarrassed that he had held it for so long.

She looked up into his eyes, her expression sort of solemn and he was unsure whether she was angry with him or disappointed he had let her hand go. "Sorry about that, Harry. I guess I wasn't quick enough to avoid the little drag racers."

"Oh, that's all right, Cassie. That aisle seems to be filled with runaway kids." He watched her eyes carefully, watching to see if she had noticed anything strange as she had been pushed up against him for that brief moment.

Her expression shifted and she smiled again, her clear blue eyes crinkling at the corners like she was about to laugh. "I used to do that when I was that age, too. I guess kids don't think about getting in the way of other shoppers." Harry nodded and relaxed a little. She apparently had either not noticed the wand or was too polite to ask why he was carrying a big stick around with him. He hoped the former. He did not want her to think he was strange.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess not. I'm not really familiar with kids at all, though. Are you?"

"Well, I used to be one." Cassie said as she automatically fell in beside Harry, who was starting to push his cart down the next aisle. She grabbed a few things and threw them into his cart as they passed the stewed tomatoes and Harry took that as a good sign that she was going to spend at least some time with him in the store. "But, I also have two younger brothers. One is 11 and one is 7. They can be annoying. I mean, I can see them running up and down store aisles if our mom's back was turned for a minute. I love them, of course, although sometimes that's more of an abstract concept if you know what I mean." She grabbed a can of something off the shelf, studying it before turning and tossing it into Harry's cart along with a bag of something that Harry thought looked rather disgusting. "Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"No." Harry said. "It's just me."

"Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. How come you're living by yourself? Where are your mom or dad?" Cassie was facing him fully now, the shopping forgotten.

"They're dead." At the look of mingled horror and embarrassment that crossed Cassie's face, Harry said, "They died when I was very small. I don't really remember them at all so don't feel bad about asking." She was going to ask another question, he could tell, but before she actually got any words out, Harry continued, "I went to live with an aunt . . . but she hated me, and as soon as she could do it, she chucked me out. That's why I'm suddenly out on my own like this." Harry was purposefully vague and left Uncle Vernon and Dudley completely out of the story. If Cassie were to repeat these details to a friend he did not want someone who had heard his story to be able to put details together and start to get suspicious.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry. It doesn't sound like a very happy life."

"Well, honestly it wasn't. But I went away to school when I was 11 and I've been very happy there. It was only summers that were really miserable after that."

"So you went to a boarding school, then?"

"Yeah. Actually, still go. I've got one more year there. What about you?" They had started up the aisle again and Harry desperately wanted to change the topic of conversation from himself to her.

"I've got two more years of school. I just turned 16. I go to school here in town, though. I don't think I'd like to be away from my family all year long." Harry nodded. He thought of school as an escape from his horrible family and was always glad when September 1st came around again and he could get back on the Hogwarts Express. He had a sudden pain where his heart was. He missed it so much . . . . If Dumbledore's plan did not work out, Harry might never go back to Hogwarts. In fact, he might be dead, this time for real and not pretend. But, he shoved that thought viciously down in his mind again and tried to concentrate on what Cassie was saying.

" . . . geometry. Of course, I did like my literature class last year and will probably take literature again in the fall, but I also have to take French, which I don't care for at all. What is your favorite subject, Harry, at your school?"

Harry had a momentary mind block. His favorite subject. It was probably Defense Against the Dark Arts, but he couldn't come out and say that, now could he? "Um, well. . ." He tried desperately to think of a subject he would take at a normal Muggle school, any subject, even if he hated it . . . Nothing was coming to mind. "I hate history. I think it's really boring." There, he hoped that would hold her off for a minute. And that was the absolute truth, although he supposed that this was mainly due to the absolutely mind-numbing delivery by Professor Binns, his only ghost teacher, rather than the subject itself.

"Oh, really," Cassie said, pausing yet again and looking greatly displeased as Harry threw a second package of biscuits into his cart but Harry stood his ground. If she wanted to eat weird veggie things, fine but he liked sweets and was used to having them in fairly large quantities at school. He would not let her disapproval change his mind. "I have always liked history, British more than world, although my teacher left a great deal to be desired last year." She seemed to not be focusing too much on his bad eating habits, preferring to discuss school, a subject he would have loved to discuss with her except that he could not really tell her anything about his school at all which made having a two-way conversation rather difficult.

Through careful avoidance of answering her questions too directly, Harry managed to get through the next 30 minutes of conversation without letting out any information that had to do with Hogwarts, Quidditch, classes, career aspirations, etc. They were standing in the check out lane waiting for the person in front of them to finish paying when Cassie looked at him with a sudden horrified expression. "Oh, Harry, are you going to be able to pay for all this? We got a lot more than last time. And how are you going to get it all home?"

"I can afford the groceries but getting it home might be a little tricky," Harry admitted. He had been so enjoying the shopping and the easy



friendly chat that they had been having that he had not thought about trying to transport all the stuff home with him.

"Maybe I could call my mum and she could drive you?" Cassie offered. Harry stiffened. That would not do at all, not at all.

"Oh, no. I'm sure . . ."

The clerk, a friendly looking woman smiled at the two of them. "If you need some way to get all this home, we sell carts at the front of the store for transporting bags."

Harry glanced at the display she had indicated. Yes, that was just what he needed, a little cart that allowed someone to strap some bags to it and roll it home. "I'll take one of those, then." He smiled back at the clerk and paid for the groceries. He was used to paying with galleons and sickles when he bought things, but had used enough Muggle money over the years that he didn't look like a complete fool as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and counted out the money.

It took the two of them working together about 10 minutes to load all the groceries onto the new cart and then they wheeled it out onto the street. Harry looked at Cassie and realized suddenly that he was not ready to say good-bye to her. "I'll walk you home, Cassie. It's getting late and I don't think you should be out alone."

"It's not dark," she protested, but Harry could tell that she really didn't mind the idea of his walking with her for a little longer. "I don't live very far from here."

"I want to walk you home. I don't want anything to happen to you." Harry smiled at her. "Don't argue. My mind is made up and I should tell you that I am very stubborn."

She turned the opposite direction than he would turn to go home and smiled back over her shoulder in that endearing way she had. "Well, come on then, slowpoke." And laughing, he followed her down the street, grabbing her arm after a minute to pull her back so she was walking next to him, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world

to let his hand slide down to hers. He linked his fingers in with hers and tightened his grasp a little. She squeezed his hand, too, and he realized instinctively that this was her way of giving her seal of approval to this new intimacy. Certainly, he thought, all is right with the world today.

## Chapter 9

### Fish, Chips, and Witches

Harry and Cassie had not walked very far down the street before he smelled something really good. He stopped and looked around for the source of the wonderful scent. Then he spotted it, a fish and chips shop. It looked like a total dive, but he really didn't care. He loved fish and chips but he had not had them in a very long time, years maybe. He started steering Cassie in that direction, but she noticed where they were headed and stopped short. "No, Harry, we can't go in there."

"Why not?"

"You aren't actually planning on eating any of that . . . food?"

"You are really obsessed with what I eat, Cassie," Harry teased but her face flushed slightly.

"Well, fine. Never mind. Eat what you want."

"I plan on it. And right now I want some of this" and he opened the door to the steamy little shop and motioned for her to enter. She hesitated, but slipped past him into the narrow confines of the store. He pulled in the little cart after them and went right up to the counter, where a very sweaty-looking man was working the cash register. "I'll have a small . . ." Harry stopped and turned to Cassie, who was standing nearby, looking intently at the menu, looking like if she stared at it hard enough, she would be invisible. "What do you want to eat, Cassie?"

"Nothing, thank you. My mom would kill me if I didn't eat dinner when I got home."

"Oh, come on. A few fish and chips would not ruin your appetite." Harry was trying his best to coax her into a smile. She did not look very happy at the moment. "Just a few chips? I bet they're really good."

"Well, I might eat a few of yours" she said, apparently hoping that would cause him to lose interest in this conversation.

"Um . . . . Well, I better take a large order of chips, then, and 4 pieces of fish." Cassie looked up at him and her eyes narrowed briefly.

"Are you implying what I think you are?"

"Not implying at all. Stating. You will eat most of the chips, I bet."

"I will not . . . They're full of . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Grease, yum!" Harry laughed, taking his order and paying the man. "Come on. Let's go sit outside while I eat." They exited the store quickly and the outside air felt cool after the oppressive heat of the shop. He sat down at one of the plastic picnic tables arranged on a rather weedy-looking patch of grass and patted the bench next to him. "Come and sit down, Cassie. I promise I won't force feed you any of this horrible stuff." She sniffed, looking rather disapproving but she sat down next to him as he bit into the first piece of fish. She watched him eat for a moment or two and then absent-mindedly reached over and picked up a chip. Harry didn't say anything but smiled to himself as her eyes widened as she tasted it. It had probably been a while since she had indulged in anything so obviously unhealthy.

Harry realized after a few minutes that Cassie really had eaten a good portion of the mountain of chips that were piled in front of him on a piece of newspaper. Not that he minded. Watching her eat chips was almost as nice as eating them himself. She caught his eye, and a slight blush crept over her cheeks as she realized that she had done exactly what he said she would. She grabbed a napkin from the dispenser on the table and wiped her hand with hard fast strokes, then dropped her hand down into her lap. She looked around at the different people sitting at the other plastic tables and said absent-mindedly, "I've walked past this place probably 100 or more times and I've never stopped. I may just have to again, sometime."

Harry smiled to himself again. "Sometimes it doesn't hurt to abandon healthy eating and just enjoy, Cassie. Now come on, I better get you

home." He bent forward to gather a napkin that was caught by the wind and was trying to blow off the end of the table. He turned to face her again and felt, more than saw, the too familiar glance up to his forehead. He instinctively reached up to pat his hair into place but it was too late. The wind had done its damage and his scar was plainly obvious.

Cassie reached up and brushed his hand aside, pushing his black hair with it. Her finger touched gently and carefully the very bottom edge of his lightning-bolt scar and traced up it carefully until it ended. He did not say anything, unsure of how to explain, unsure of what she would think. She took her finger off his forehead, brushing his hair back down. "Oh, Harry. What . . . happened?" Her voice was strained, like she was trying hard not to cry.

Harry turned away from her, staring at but not seeing the water-stained siding on the little fish and chips shop. He didn't want to lie to her. He wanted to make her understand, at least a little, about it. "It was . . . the night my parents died. I was hurt, you see, and almost died myself . . . . But, somehow. . . . Well, somehow, I lived. And I had this scar."

"Oh, Harry." Again, her voice sounded tight, like it was being forced through tears at the back of her throat. "Does it hurt horribly?"

Harry turned quickly and stared at her, amazed again at how blue her eyes were as they met his. "It does, a lot, actually," he said. He had never admitted that much to anyone, ever. It was true that in his fifth year at Hogwarts most people knew that the scar hurt when Lord Voldemort was "communicating" with Harry, but no one, not even his best friends, knew that it basically hurt all the time. It had actually been rather strange because ever since he had arrived here it had never even twinged. At the look of sympathy in her eyes, he quickly added, "But not now. It doesn't hurt at all right now. Don't feel too bad for me, Cassie. I'm used to it."

Cassie took his hand as he helped her stand up from the bench and looked with narrowed eyes at him. "Why do you hide it? Are you ashamed that you lived through the accident or whatever?"

"No, I'm not ashamed . . . I just, . . . Most people tend to stare at it and notice it before they notice anything else about me. I just try to minimize that, I guess." A small smile crept slowly onto her face.

"I guess I can understand that." They walked on toward her house; this time taking her hand had seemed only right. And her gentle squeeze of his fingers as she said this confirmed to him that she really did understand. It was strange, he thought, that this Muggle girl who knew absolutely nothing about him and his whole life story, understood him as well or better than people who knew everything about his parents and Voldemort and the scar and his destiny and the War . . .

Harry suddenly stopped short. A cold chill ran through him even though the evening was warm. There, across the street, stood a witch. An elderly one, but he could tell even from this distance easily that she was indeed a witch. Her bright emerald cloak and old-fashioned hat was something that only a witch or wizard would wear on the streets of London. "What?" Cassie asked. Harry knew that most Muggles could not see witches or wizards. They weren't exactly invisible, just not . . . noticed.

He shrugged, "Um, nothing. I just need to tie my shoe." He bent down, trying not to look at the witch although he could certainly feel her eyes on him. If he met her eyes she would know he was a wizard and since his face was probably one of the most famous in the wizarding world, this could be a major problem. His heart was racing with terror. He wanted to reach up and touch his hair, making sure that his scar was covered, but he knew that that would be a major mistake. He tried to slow his breathing as he forced himself to rise from his crouch and took Cassie's hand again. Even if he looked vaguely familiar, if she thought he was just a Muggle . . . . He stepped determinedly again, not daring to glance back at her, but out of the corner of his eye as he turned his head slightly he could see that she was gone. He needed to get home, desperately, immediately. He really was terribly vulnerable out on the street and that brief encounter had driven the point home in the worst way, much more than all of Dumbledore's lectures had done.

Harry was just about to ask how much farther her house was when she said, "Here, Harry. The white house on the right" and he looked at where she was pointing to see a house that looked comfortable and friendly, its lights shining out onto the darkening street, welcoming Cassie home.

## Chapter 10

### Sir Lionel Speaks

Both Cassie and Harry stood awkwardly for a moment outside of her house, their fingers still linked together. "I guess. . ." Harry paused, "I guess I better be going home." He knew he needed to be home. His heart was still beating fast and the terror that had flooded through his body just a few minutes before was ebbing but he had not forgotten it. The fright was nearly matched by the regret that he had to leave her now. He wanted to stay with her longer, just to keep touching her. Cassie nodded at his words and pulled her hand away from his. Suddenly, before Harry could prepare for it at all, she hugged him, sliding her arms around his waist and pressing her face against his shoulder. Just as had happened at the store, Harry realized first that her hair smelled really nice, like spring sunshine. The second thing that he noticed, however, was that there was no way she could not feel his wand this time. She was pressed against him for just a quick moment but he was sure that she felt it against her arm.

She drew back from him a few inches and said, with a definite question in her voice, "What is that, Harry?" and her small hand reached for his T-shirt, pressing it against the wood, trying to judge its size and shape. "I thought I felt something earlier, but thought I must have been imagining things. I wasn't though."

"I can't really explain, Cassie. It's kind of a good luck thing. Maybe . . . . Look. I've really got to go home." He didn't mean to be as abrupt with her as he was. He had hoped this moment would never come, when he would have to lie to her. But here it was and he just wasn't up to dealing with this issue right now.

Cassie seemed to sense his withdrawal and did not press him farther. He moved to walk away and very quietly she asked "Will you call me again, Harry? I promise I won't ask you any questions you don't want to answer." He saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes, and he wanted to do nothing except pull her back into his arms and tell her everything, but he couldn't. He couldn't.



"I can't promise, Cassie. But I'll try. I'll really try." Harry turned away from her, wanting to stay but knowing that he had to leave. The last four hours had been some of the best of his entire life and he could hardly bear the thought of leaving her crying when she had been the reason for his happiness. "I had a great time today, Cassie." And before she could form some sort of answer, he was gone.

He walked home through the dusky evening quickly, pulling the cart behind him. His thoughts were in turmoil. How was he going to handle Cassie? What should he have told her about the wand? Did that witch recognize him? Was the news right now being carried by owl to every Death Eater in Britain that he was still alive? Could he call Cassie again? Should he call her again? Would she tell someone about his scar? Would someone put two and two together and guess the truth? Harry felt as though a hurricane was traveling through him, picking up and throwing down random thoughts and he was unable to focus on any of them.

He walked cautiously up the empty street when he arrived at Little Chesterton Lane. He felt certain that dark wizards would jump out from behind each and every tree or parked car that he passed. It wasn't so much that he was frightened for himself as much as knowing how much effort Dumbledore had put into this whole plan. If he blew it, he would feel terrible for betraying Dumbledore's trust. He did not want to be the cause of anyone else being hurt or dying in the war. He wanted it over just as badly, if not worse, than Dumbledore did. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the piece of parchment with the address of the house on it. He did not think he needed this now, but was not familiar enough with how the Fidelius charm worked to be certain. He figured better safe than sorry. He read over the address and thought about it briefly and the house appeared as it had before, looking like a very safe refuge from all of Harry's inner chaos. He practically ran up the steps, carrying the cart in his arms.

"Sir Cadogan," he threw at the doorbell, which opened the door as a response and started to say, "It's about time you . . ." But Harry didn't hear the rest of what was undoubtedly a lecture on the lateness of the hour as he slammed the door shut behind him. He shoved the locks

into place with hands that were shaking slightly and as they clicked behind him, he collapsed against the door in exhaustion.

After a moment, Harry stood up. "I've got to get myself together" he said. Then another wave of terror rolled through him as he realized that there had been one major change in his house since he left four hours before. Sir Lionel was awake, awake and pacing. Harry's heart sank under the new wave of concern and guilt. He had been discovered. It was over. He approached Sir Lionel with feet dragging on each step. What could he say? How could he explain?

"Ah, Harry! Been out and about, I suppose?" This rather wheezy looking knight was looking him up and down and (Harry felt like rubbing his hands into his suddenly-tired eyes) he was actually smiling. "Dumbledore sent me with a message, of course. Here it is. The knight paused for dramatic effect, and Harry quickly faked a yawn to hide an involuntary smile at his pretentious attitude. "Harry, everything is going as planned here. I am pleased to report that your death has been well-reported and the Daily Prophet for the last five days has been printing detailed accounts concerning it. There are some signs that Voldemort's forces are changing strategy into more open battle, and that is what I want. I have been getting your notes and you sound bored but as though you are doing all the things you need to, Harry. We miss you and I will be very pleased when I can return you to your friends, who mourn your loss deeply." The knight stopped reciting from his memorized text and said in a low whisper. "It's true, young man. I have seen both young Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger in Dumbledore's office numerous times now, crying and questioning him about your death." Although Harry supposed that this was meant to make him feel better, it did not. The ache in his heart grew. He knew very well how it felt to lose someone you loved and he could only imagine the agony that both Ron and Hermione were going through. At least they had each other, he thought. Maybe this would finally force them to admit that they were meant to be together.

The knight continued, "I can take back any messages you wish to send to Dumbledore. I will tell him you are well, of course." Harry nodded vaguely. Apparently, rumors of the famous Harry Potter, alive and well, being seen walking on the streets of London were not circulating, yet. "Tell him. . . Tell him I want to come back. The sooner

the better. Now would be good." The knight wheezed in dusty laughter at that and strode out of his frame to return to his other painting, the one hanging in the old headmaster's office.

Harry sat down heavily on the uncomfortable armchair. So far, at least, he had been lucky. He felt more tired than he had in a very long time. He put away the groceries with as much speed as he could muster and collapsed onto his bed, not even bothering to pull the covers over himself before he fell into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 11

### Laundry

The morning sun was pouring heavily onto Harry's face when he finally rolled over, groaning, the next morning. He had not bothered to pull the curtains the night before and now regretted it as he really wanted to sleep for several more hours. However, once he was awake he did not fall back to sleep easily. He sat up, stiff and uncomfortable after sleeping fully clothed sideways on the bed. He peeled off his clothes and stepped into a quick shower. He emerged several minutes later wearing only a towel and opened the drawer where he had thrown all his clothes that he had purchased several days before. As he looked into the drawer, he let a mild curse word slip past his lips. Laundry! He had nothing clean to wear. He remembered rather belatedly that he had meant to ask Cassie about how to do laundry yesterday. He honestly had no idea how Muggles did the laundry. He remembered watching his aunt Petunia do it when he was very young but he did not understand how it all worked and he certainly could not have asked her (even assuming he cared) as asking questions in the Dursley household was absolutely forbidden.

At Hogwarts, the house-elves took care of all these pesky little details and he was just used to opening up his trunk and finding clean folded robes, uniforms, and socks when he needed them. He supposed that Mrs. Weasley did laundry but that would not help him at all now. He had never watched her do it and anyway it was likely she used magic. However, today there was no help for it. He was going to have to figure it out. As it was, he was going to have to wear dirty clothes today until he could get the others clean.

He seriously thought for a long minute about calling Cassie again. After all, and a rather silly smile crossed his face at this thought, yesterday's phone call had turned out very well. But he remembered how curious she had been about some things. Certainly if he called her and confessed that he had no idea how to do the laundry she would find this even more suspicious. Maybe it would be better if he just experimented a little. It couldn't be that difficult, could it? He gathered up all of the dirty clothes that he had piled in his closet over the last few days and carried them into the living room. He noticed

idly that Sir Lionel was back in his frame and snoring quite loudly, probably worn out from the message delivery yesterday. Harry pulled out a phone book that was on the small phone stand and thumbed through it, not quite sure what he was looking for. He found it, though. LAUNDROMAT seemed to be the pertinent heading and, reading quickly through the ads, it seemed like the self-serve laundries were exactly what he needed. He consulted a map that was at the front of the book and found a place that was not terribly far away from his house. He wrote down the address carefully as well as the phone number in case he got lost.

He hurriedly wrote his daily report to Dumbledore, only touching briefly on the fact that he had seen a witch out on the streets. He, again, did not mention meeting with Cassie and, as he had every day since he arrived, he again suppressed the niggling feeling of guilt as he sealed the envelope and stuck on a stamp. He stuck the letter in his pocket along with the now well-used piece of parchment with the house address on it. He took some money out of the bag in the bedroom, a generous amount, but as he had no idea how much it would cost to do laundry he felt that he would be well-served to take plenty. He picked up his trusty wand, letting his fingers play gently over the surface that he knew so well, careful not to accidentally set off any sparks. He was glad that Dumbledore had let him keep the wand. Even though he couldn't use it right now, it brought him some comfort. He tucked it yet again into his waistband and recalled the way that Cassie had touched it through his T-shirt the night before, trying to figure out what it was. He felt heat rising up his neck as he recalled the way she had hugged him. She had felt so good pressed against him that way. She smelled good, too. He had really wanted to hug her back, hard, and just stand there for a while holding her, but that just hadn't been possible.

Trying to shove thoughts of the girl to the back of his mind, he put the clothes into the grocery bags from the night before and fastened them to the grocery cart, realizing again what a good investment he had made. His stomach was definitely in knots as he stood in front of the door and undid the locks. He felt very nervous, today, heading out onto the street again. He automatically checked to make sure his hair was down over the scar and opened the door. He moved as quickly as possible getting down the steps. He felt most vulnerable there for

some reason, before the house disappeared again and he could blend in with people walking by on the streets. The doorbell called out a farewell and a warning that he should hurry back before Harry stepped off the bottom stair and the house folded in on itself again and was gone.

It took Harry about 30 minutes to find the Laundromat. He got lost two times and had to ask directions. Once he got there, however, he realized that in the future, it would probably only be about a 10 minute walk from his place. That was good. The Laundromat was practically empty, which made him happy as he wanted to make a fool of himself in front of as few people as possible. He looked carefully around at the signs and the various displays along the walls, hoping that he could get some idea from them what he was supposed to do. The signs were generally unhelpful, saying things like "Do not leave clothes unattended" and "No dying."

Sighing, he approached a woman who was folding laundry at a table. She looked kind although she was slightly frazzled as she had one baby fussing in a nearby stroller and a toddler who kept trying to escape out the front door.

"Excuse me," Harry said. She looked up at him and smiled briefly.

"Yes."

"I hate to sound stupid," he continued, "but I really have no clue how to do this. Could you give me some pointers?"

"Um, sure." She looked kind of surprised at his question. He supposed that it really was rather unusual to be as old as he was and have no idea how to do something as ridiculously basic as getting clean clothes from dirty, but he smiled bravely, trying to bluff his way through. He grabbed the toddler by the arm as he made yet another attempted escape in order to help the woman out a little bit and she smiled a little more warmly at him.

"First, you need to make sure you sort the clothes by color: whites, darks, lights, etc." Harry must have looked very confused at this statement because she said, "You really don't have a clue about this,

do you?" He shook his head, feeling like a fool. "Well, come on, then, I guess I better walk you through the whole thing." Forty-five minutes later, she helped him load the last of his T-shirts into one of the big dryers and throw in a fabric softening sheet on top of them. "I've got to run, Harry. Will you be alright?" Harry looked down at the little girl sleeping in his arms. She had pale blonde hair framing a really pretty face. Harry couldn't help but think of Cassie and her beautiful hair. He absolutely loved her hair. It was long and silky and it smelled like sunshine. Pulling himself back to the present, he walked over to the stroller. He had tried to help the woman as much as possible in exchange for all of her help with his laundry and had wound up holding the fussing baby for a few minutes as she had finished up the last of her folding. The baby had fallen asleep on his lap and he decided that kids really weren't so bad. He figured Cassie would approve.

"Thanks for all the help, ma'am." He handed the baby back to the woman, grateful that he had asked her. She had helped him buy the soap and the softener sheets, sort the clothes, get them washed, and then loaded in the dryer. It had been fairly easy, really, once he understood the concept, and he felt confident that he could do it himself next time. He had assured her that he could fold his clothes without too much problem, although she had told him that if he remembered to pull out the things as they dried they would be much less wrinkled than if he just left them all in there together. She left, with her little boy dragging behind her calling out, "Arry, mommy! I wants 'Arry." He smiled to himself as he watched them head down the street. The little boy had liked him quite a bit and they had played hide and seek what felt like 50 times as he had waited for his clothes to wash.

He had the place to himself for about five minutes before a rather frail-looking gentleman walked in with a small load of clothes. Harry watched as he started the load in one of the washers and then sat down at one of the long folding tables. The man pulled out a deck of playing cards and sorted them into various little piles. Harry was positive he was playing some sort of game. After a few moments, he found himself drifting over to the man and watching. The man seemed a little surprised, just as the woman had, that Harry had no idea how to do something as easy as play Solitaire but he showed

him the basics. Harry watched carefully and learned, thinking that this was something he could do back at the house to try to while away the long hours waiting for Dumbledore to decide that it was time for him to go back to fight.

After folding all of his clothes and piling them again on the cart, Harry stepped back out into the warm sunshine, blinking a little at the brightness after the subdued lighting in the little Laundromat. He would have to find a drug store and buy a deck of cards. He thought that he would show Ron how to play this game with his exploding snap cards when they had time for such things again. Harry imagined that it would be much more exciting if there was a chance that if he lost, the cards would blow up in disgust. He laughed softly under his breath, and started heading back home.



## Chapter 12

### The Scar Hurts Again

The new game of solitaire kept Harry occupied for the next two days, but only in the most superficial way. He was, if it was possible, even more aware of how alone he was than he had been before his fantastic afternoon with Cassie. He had thought that seeing her once would be enough. But, he decided on the second day, seeing her was like eating crisps. You had one and then you just wanted more. He was lying on his bed on the afternoon of the one-week anniversary of his "death" and could not stop thinking about the possibility of talking to her again. He knew it would be foolish, knew that he had already pushed his luck once, knew that this plan of Dumbledore's hinged on his remaining undiscovered, but the thought of spending more time with Cassie was becoming almost an obsession.

Of course, he realized that it was possible she would not want to spend time with him, but he pushed that dreary thought aside. She had hugged him and smiled at him and asked him to call her again. She had held his hand and . . . well, she had understood about his scar. He kept remembering how she had looked at him . . . He pushed himself up from the bed and walked back out into the living room. He flipped on the television just to have some noise and started pacing back and forth. He felt like an animal in a cage. He was used to physical activity and used to having things to keep his mind occupied. This enforced solitary confinement was practically driving him mad.

He barely slept that night, tossing and turning as he contemplated the next few weeks of boredom. By morning, he knew he had to get out of the house for longer than then 10 minutes it took him to drop off Dumbledore's letter every day. He wrote an especially long letter to his headmaster, begging to come back to Hogwarts. He was vaguely ashamed of himself as he read back over the letter, certainly his mental lassitude was nothing compared to the possibility of losing this war. He should be mature enough to overcome this petty obstacle and just endure. He knew that it was probable, even likely, that he would not survive the upcoming battle and he should enjoy every day

of life left to him. But despite all of this talk, he could just not reconcile himself to the lack of activity.

As he left the house to drop off the letter, he decided that he would stroll around the streets for just a few extra minutes. He walked around the block a few times, enjoying the feel of the sun on his face. It was a perfect day for Quidditch, he thought, the sort of day that should be enjoyed on a broom with a friend or two to throw a Quaffle with. He let his mind wander back to the last day he had been on the pitch, throwing the balls around with Ron, enjoying the simple pleasure of flying. Had it really been only a month ago? He remembered that when he was first at Hogwarts, he had not been particularly good at magic but he had been a natural on a broom. Even then, he had found peace in flying that he rarely found with anything else. He allowed himself a few moments of self-pity before dragging himself back into the present. He needed to focus on what he needed to do to help win this War.

He turned a corner to head back to the house as he felt his frustration had lessened to a great degree. His eyes scanned the street automatically and lit on a discarded newspaper lying on the top of the rubbish bin and the photo of a huge fire that was on the front cover. He glanced around quickly to make sure no one was watching and picked it up. As he read, he felt a knot of dread form and settle into the pit of his stomach. There had been an explosion as yet unexplained in a small town on the outskirts of London the previous evening. The name of the town or the people involved meant nothing to Harry, but the words "mysterious explosion" sounded to him like the typical cover story the Ministry of Magic usually released when something had happened involving the Death Eaters or Voldemort. Harry carried the newspaper home immediately and read the article through several times. The story certainly did not seem to be connected to wizards at all but he knew from previous experience that the Ministry was extremely careful with this sort of accident. He started pacing again. He wondered for a minute if it was worth sending Sir Lionel to Dumbledore to figure out what had happened.

Then, unexpectedly, Harry felt an all-too-familiar pang on his forehead. He stopped pacing and gasped in surprise. The pain receded immediately, but the knot in his stomach just tightened. It had been

eight days since he had felt his scar hurt, eight days where he could almost pretend that the War wasn't real, that no one was really out to kill him, that the life and death struggle he was so used to fighting was not really happening. He started pacing again, thinking hard. Was it just a coincidence that his scar had hurt again, after so long a break, on the day after a "mysterious explosion" had occurred? Harry really did not think so. He forced himself to calm down, to breathe deeply. The pain was gone completely now, and Harry cleared his mind almost automatically as he had been taught in his occlumency lessons. Harry knew that Voldemort could, if he was so inclined, read Harry's mind. That was the last thing they needed right now. Harry supposed that if Voldemort really thought he was dead, he probably was not trying to use his mind for anything, but if Harry allowed himself to get too aggravated, there was a possibility that Voldemort might suddenly sense him, and then all would be lost.

His mind turned again to Cassie as he tried to keep calm. The thought of being with her now beckoned him like an oasis in a desert. He glanced over at Sir Lionel, still snoring in his frame. Obviously, nothing too traumatic had happened or he would be gone, getting messages. Harry fixed a quick lunch for himself, waiting for a while before he decided that Sir Lionel really was not going to be leaving any time soon. After all, Dumbledore would have known immediately about the explosion and if it was something that involved Harry he would have sent a message long ago. Harry breathed a little slower, trying not to let that little twinge in his scar unnerve him. Voldemort was still around and active and that was a fact. Whether Harry's scar hurt or not did not change anything.

Harry could not stay in the house one more minute! He had to leave now, right now! It was either that, or he was going to start blasting holes in things. The walls were closing in on him. He really needed to get out of here! A funny little voice in his head that usually sounded a lot like Hermione but today sounded a lot like Ron assured him that Dumbledore would be happier if he was outside blending in with the regular population looking inconspicuous than if he was blowing holes in the wall of his invisible house. Harry decided that he agreed with this sensible voice. He also decided right then that he was going to go call her and hopefully see her. If he was really careful about where he went and what he did when he was out of the house, it did not

really matter if she was with him or not, did it? Being with her was even better, actually, he thought after a moment, than being by himself. She would tend to go to places that other Muggles went and if he went with her, he would blend in better. Yes. That was true. That was really a good idea. Pleased with himself for coming up with an excuse that he thought would stave off any disapproval from his conscience or his normal Hermione-voice, he grabbed his wand, and stepped once again into the heat of the afternoon.

He dialed her number carefully at the same phone box where he had called her before. His hands were shaking badly and he was surprised to admit to himself how desperately he hoped that she was home.

"Robinson's, Cassie speaking" the phone suddenly squawked in his ear, and Harry's heart suddenly felt lighter than it had in days. He smiled and leaned back against the glass door.

"Hi, Cassie. It's Harry." He had never told her a last name and hoped that she recognized immediately who he was. He would have felt like a fool trying to remind her which Harry he was.

"Hi, Harry." Her tone was warm as the sun outside, and Harry knew, despite everything, that he wanted to see her again. As soon as possible. He cleared his throat trying to decide what to say.

She spoke first, though, and the light teasing in her tone took all the sting out of her words. "I guess you managed to find the time to call me."

"Yeah." He paused. That sounded bad. "I mean, I wanted to earlier but I just couldn't." Harry took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Is there any chance of . . . my seeing you again, soon? I don't care where or anything. I just want to-" His voice trailed off in kind of an embarrassed silence. He didn't want to frighten her away or anything and somehow saying something like "be with you," or "be near you" might sound like he was a little obsessed. She did not say anything, though, to relieve his embarrassment, and he tried again. "I thought that maybe we could go somewhere together."

This time, she spoke carefully. "What do you mean, exactly?"

He had considered this already. "Well, um. . . .I kind of meant maybe just hanging around together. You know, uh, just doing something that you like to do. I don't know anyone else here and I just thought we could do something." He thought that this was probably the stupidest answer, ever.

"Oh." Maybe, Harry thought, he imagined the disappointment in her response. "Well, yeah. That sounds fun. There's only one problem." Harry's heart sank. What could it be? She didn't go out with boys who carried strange sticks in their jeans? Maybe she had a thing about curse scars or something? She continued. "My parents have to meet you first. They don't let me go out with friends they don't know." Harry's first thought was that this was not a big deal. Why did she sound so worried? Then he remembered how he had rather quickly turned down her invitation to dinner a few days ago. He also recalled how he had refused Cassie's offer of having her mother drive him home after the grocery shopping and how he had not wanted to go into the house that same evening when they had walked home together. She must think he was really terrified of meeting her parents.

"That's alright. That would be fine." Harry had long since decided that they must be a completely Muggle family. Otherwise, the axe would have already fallen and he would have been taken back to Hogwarts in disgrace. He was relatively safe with them, as long as he kept his secrets. And keeping secrets was something he knew how to do very well.

## Chapter 13

### Stars and Scars

"Well, then, um . . . when could we get together?" Harry stammered a little over this question. He desperately wanted her to answer that he could come over right now. He did not want to go back to the house. True, he felt a little better now that he had spoken to her and she seemed to still want to see him, but he just really wanted to be with her today.

"I have to go somewhere in a few minutes" she said. Harry thought she sounded a little disappointed again, so he held his breath, hoping that she would finish that thought the way it sounded like she might. "But I suppose you could come if you wanted to. It'll probably be kind of boring, but we could, uh, talk." Harry thought that this sounded wonderful. He really did not care what they did, as long as he was doing it with her. "I've got to take my little brother to his swimming class."

"Oh. Would that actually involve swimming?" Harry wasn't very keen on swimming. He could usually keep his head above water, but only just. Of course, there was the time two years ago that he had swum underwater for over an hour, fighting off mer people and grindelows. But he had help that time with gillyweed and he did not think he could manage to produce any of that on short notice. And, anyway, that experience had done nothing to make him enjoy being in the water. Quite the opposite, actually.

"No, I just have to stay there and wait for him to finish . . . Do you think--"

Harry jumped right in. "I think that sounds brilliant. I think it will take me about 25 minutes to get to your house. Will that be okay?"

"Yeah, that's perfect, actually. We need to leave in about 40."

"Great. I'll be there." Harry hung the phone up, and leaned back against the warm glass of the phone booth door. He felt a bubble of happiness rising slowly from his stomach to his throat and then he did

not want to hold it in - "Yeah!" He pumped his arm above his head. He felt like he had just caught the Golden Snitch and won the Quidditch house cup. He stepped out of the booth, automatically checking that his hair was covering his forehead, and headed down the street.

He arrived at the white house on the quiet block where Cassie lived 28 minutes later. He was breathing sort of hard, but not because of the rather brisk walk he had just had. He had walked by the place where that witch had been standing three days before and Harry's heart had started racing. He was hoping that no one who could potentially recognize him was staring out of unseen windows. He had clenched his hand against the urge to grab his wand and walked up the street, looking straight ahead. When he reached his destination, he paused, and she came out onto the porch to meet him as he climbed the steps. The brilliance of her smile made him remember why, despite the danger, he just couldn't stay away from her.

"Hi." They both said it together, and then both looked down at their feet, and Harry felt the warmth of a blush spread over his neck. "Come on in," Cassie said, and held out her hand to him like she felt he would need a little extra support. He took her hand gratefully and felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on his as she pulled him through the door. Her mother was slim, pretty, and looked nothing like Cassie. Her hair and eyes were dark rather than the sunshine and sky of Cassie's coloring. But she was friendly, welcoming Harry with a warm smile and only one or two questions that he was able to answer easily.

The little brother, John was his name, came running out a minute later and grabbed Cassie's hand, "Come on, Pia. Let's go, let's go!" Cassie laughed and allowed herself to be steered out the door again, grabbing a bag that was sitting by the door. Harry followed, laughing himself at the excitement the little boy demonstrated, practically dragging his sister down the stairs.

They talked quietly about nothing as they walked down the street to the public swimming pool where, Harry was told, John had taken lessons now for two weeks and today was his next-to-last lesson. "My mum will be bringing him tomorrow, but she had something else to do

today." It was not until they had seen the little boy into the pool with his classmates and Cassie had thrown a blanket out onto the grass under a tree about 30 feet away from the pool, that Harry asked her the question that had rolled around in his brain since they had left her house. She was arranging herself on the blanket with a book and a water bottle. The shorts she was wearing showed off her long legs, and Harry tried not to stare at them as she kicked off her sandals, crossed her feet, and patted the blanket next to her, indicating that he should go ahead and sit down. "Why does he call you Pia?" He had thought the first time that he had just misheard the boy, but by the fourth time John had called to her to hurry, deciding apparently that talking to Harry was making her slow, he had decided that there had been no mistake.

"Both my brothers do, actually. When Matthew was little, he's the older one, well, when he was little, he couldn't say my name and that's what he could manage, so . . ." She turned to check on the kids in the pool but Harry thought she was hoping he would drop the question. It embarrassed her for some reason. He persevered.

"So, he couldn't say Cassie . . . and said Pia instead?" He looked steadily at the back of her head, trying really hard to resist the temptation to reach out and move the strands of hair that were blowing across her face in the light breeze.

"It's . . . Oh, all right. Fine. I guess you would have found out sooner or later, anyway. My name is, well, it's Cassiopeia, you know, the constellation. I shortened it to Cassie to go to school. I mean, honestly, what sort of a person names their child after stars? My mum was a bit of a free spirit in her day, I think. Obviously, she got her act together by the time the boys came along. They've got regular boring names. " From the ring of frustration in her tone, Harry realized that this was a delicate subject with her.

"Ah. Cassiopeia. So, they just caught the end of your name, Pia. Actually, I like it for a name. I know quite a few people named after stars and things." He stopped, deciding that explaining about his godfather might open up subjects that were better not discussed. "In astronomy class, Cassiopeia was always one of my favorite constellations to look for, she is easy to chart and easy to see." Harry



looked up at the bright blue of the afternoon sky, remembering fondly the many midnight hours spent in the astronomy tower, carefully charting the movements of the planets, stars, and constellations. "I guess if they wanted to name you after a constellation, they could have done worse, how about, um, well, Orion? Or Equuleus? " He snorted a brief laugh, trying to imagine what other horrible names that her parents could have stuck her with. He noticed that Cassie was staring at him with a look of mingled surprise and puzzlement on her face.

"You take astronomy at school? That seems kind of like a weird subject." Harry caught his breath momentarily. He had said more than he probably should have, but it was hardly fatal - not like saying Potions or something. He could handle this.

"It's an elective, you know. I think one of the teachers just has a thing and started it kind of like a club and then . . . well. Now it's a class." He hoped she would not ask more about it. Luck was definitely on his side. John came running over at that moment to where they were sitting and announced some terribly important piece of news about another boy in the class, and then ran back on little feet to rejoin the boy in the water.

They left the topic of school completely after the interruption and drifted into chatting about other things. "On the phone, Harry, you sounded like if you had actually had to get into the water, you wouldn't have agreed to come. Don't you know how to swim?" Cassie had abandoned all pretense now of reading her book, and was just laying there on her stomach on the blanket kicking her feet behind her as they talked. Harry sat next to her, feeling relaxed and sleepy in the warmth of the afternoon. She seemed genuinely interested in everything he said and he found himself saying things to her that he had never admitted out loud to any other person.

"My aunt never had lessons for me. I think she hoped that if I were ever in deep water, I would drown." He was surprised at how little bitterness he now felt toward the Dursleys. Dudley had had lessons for years and that had always rankled Harry but now he realized it didn't matter.

Cassie laughed at what she thought was his joke, but Harry said "Seriously, Cassie. I'm not just joking."

"Why did she hate you so much?" There was a genuine question in her voice, and Harry decided he would be as honest as he could with her.

"She hated my mother, hated my father. Now why she hated them, I'm not really sure. I have my ideas, but they don't seem to be enough to have caused the absolute hatred she had for the two of them." He paused. Petunia could barely bring herself to say her own sister's name. And Harry could not remember a single time in his life that the name James had actually crossed her lips. He shook his head. "Anyway, when she was stuck with me, I think she hated me twice as much as she had hated them. And, believe me, that's a lot of hate." He leaned back against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. He was too tired of hating, too tired of being hated, to drag up much emotion about the Dursleys today, he decided, feeling the lack of sleep the night before make itself known at the edges of his consciousness. He could easily fall asleep right here.

He felt a sharp sting on his hand and dragged his eyes open to look down and see a bug on his right hand, obviously mid-bite. He reached down to squash it, but Cassie's hand got there first, brushing it off with a quick movement. She got up on her knees and leaned over him, looking closely at his hand, pulling it out into the sunlight to look for a mark. "Did it get you?" At Harry's quick nod, she rubbed the spot with her thumb. Then, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the back of his hand. She tilted her head, first one way and then the other, shifting his hand a little. Then her eyes met his and he realized suddenly what she had just noticed and he wanted to pull his hand back. He swallowed instead. "What made this scar, Harry? It's a lot newer than the other one." He swallowed again, forcing back the bile that had risen in the back of his throat at the reminder of what had caused those thin lines on the back of his hand. Her thumb was rubbing carefully now over the back of his entire hand from knuckles to wrist, soothing, perhaps, the brief reminder of past pain. "Does it hurt all the time, too, like that one?" Her eyes glanced up at his forehead.

"No. It doesn't hurt. It was just an accident at school, Cassie, nothing to worry about. Nothing at all."

## Chapter 14

### Invitation Accepted

His vague answer did not really seem to satisfy Cassie's curiosity, but since he didn't say anything more, she allowed the subject to drop and turned over again onto her stomach to look over at her brother, who was currently jumping into the pool. Harry leaned back against the tree trunk again, thinking. He had got the impression that she was going to ask if he would go swimming with her sometime. He had to admit that it was a tempting thought. He allowed his mind to contemplate what she would look like in a swimsuit for just a minute and then pushed his mind onto the practicalities of the situation. For one thing, hair did not stay in place when it was wet and the last thing he needed was for his scar to be plainly visible to a whole pool full of people when his hair was pushed back. For another thing, it might be little awkward to try to hide his wand, which Dumbledore had specifically told him to keep with him all the time, hidden under a swimsuit. It wasn't the getting wet part. He had taken his wand, after all, into the lake and it worked fine. Yes, he could wear a T-shirt but once it was wet, it would not hide anything. No, it was probably best just to pretend he was terribly frightened of getting wet at all and leave it at that. He opened his eyes again. She hadn't said anything for a few moments, and he hoped he hadn't hurt her feelings.

She was still lying on her stomach but had picked up her book and turned to the bookmark like she was going to start reading instead of talking to him. He laid down next to her, propping his head on his hands and glancing at the book to see what she was reading. It was a novel he had never heard of. She turned to him, smiling.

"I thought you were asleep, you were so quiet."

"I could sleep, but that would be rude."

"No, it wouldn't. If you're tired, you should sleep. We still have about a half hour before the lesson is over."

"I'd be embarrassed to fall asleep. I mean . . ." Harry didn't want to admit that he did not want to miss a moment of talking to her but he

was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. He took his glasses off, laying them next to him on the blanket, closed his eyes, and put his head down on his arms. "I'll just rest for a second. Wake me up if you need me, all right?"

He woke up a few minutes later with a start, jumping suddenly. He was alone on the blanket and he couldn't see Cassie anywhere. His scar was hurting again, vaguely, the usual level of pain that let him know that something was going on with Voldemort back in the wizarding world. He rubbed it instinctively, worried most at this moment about making sure that Cassie was okay. Her book was there. He grabbed his glasses and things came into focus as he looked around. He stood up quickly looking at the pool to make sure that John was still swimming with his class. He was not sure he would recognize one wet little boy in with the others, but it seemed he was wearing a green swimsuit. His eyes scanned frantically through the crowd and he felt another jolt of panic when he couldn't pick him out. He had just decided that he needed to start searching for them when the two of them came around a corner. Harry was amazed at the feeling that overwhelmed him at the sight of her. She looked up at him and smiled, and he truly felt like shouting. Even the pain in his scar did not do anything to damper his joy at being with this girl.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up when I got up."

"No, you didn't. I just suddenly woke up and you weren't here. I got nervous." He probably should not admit that. It made him sound paranoid, but he could not help it.

"John needed to use the loo. He doesn't like to go by himself."

"Oh. I guess I didn't need to worry then." He absent-mindedly rubbed his scar again, the pain was receding and would be gone in a minute. He took a deep breath. He better be heading home after he delivered them safely back to their house.

"Why would you worry? Did you think we'd been attacked or something?" She was laughing as she lay back down next to him, this time on her back, staring up at the tree that was shading the blanket where he had laid back down on his stomach.

"Well, anything could happen." Harry noticed a little defensive note in his voice and cringed inwardly. He was so used to being on a high state of alert that it was hard to remember that she lived in a world where they knew nothing of dark wizards, curse scars, and threats to anyone who was ever seen in his presence.

"Is it hurting now?" She asked suddenly and it took Harry a minute to realize that she was watching his hand rub the scar under his bangs.

"Uh, a little. It hurt a little earlier today and now it's hurting again. I just kind of rub it out of habit sometimes." He hoped that this sentence did not sound as stupid to her as it did to him. He was sure that he was really impressing her with his conversation right now, acting like he was paranoid, frightened of water, worried about a little pain, etc. She didn't say anything in response, just watched him for a moment, and he felt himself growing warmer under her steady gaze.

"It's all right to admit it bothers you, you know." Her voice was soft and serious. She reached up a tentative hand and placed her fingers over his. He moved his hand slowly away, and she left her fingers there, covering the scar. The pain, as he expected, had gone completely by now and her fingers felt cool against his warm skin.

"It doesn't bother me . . ." She just smiled up into his face and let her index finger trace the scar again. "Well, okay." He said these words like they were dragged from him. "I admit it. I hate the stupid thing. I wish . . . I wish things had been different." He shrugged and pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose. He had long ago decided that since nothing could change what had happened, he should just accept it and do his best to live up to the big responsibility that the scar had set squarely on his shoulders. It seemed that the responsibility just got bigger as time went by also rather than diminishing. Sometimes it was just completely overwhelming. He felt the ache of tears forming in the back of his throat and he searched his mind desperately for something to say. He absolutely refused to break down in front of her. She'd really think he was a nutters then.

Once again, luck seemed to be on his side as the little feet came into view again and John threw his wet body right on top of Cassie. Harry

guessed that the lesson must be over as all the other little kids were heading over to their parents also. Cassie jumped at the shock of cold water and then flipped over and started tickling her little brother. They both laughed loudly and Harry could tell this was a game they had played several times before. He sat up and watched as she allowed herself to be "beaten" by her brother who was now standing with one foot on her stomach and posing like a weight lifter.

"I did it. I won you. I won you." John started dancing around in a victory celebration as Cassie stood up and gathered the blanket and book.

"It's 'I beat you,' John. You win a trophy, not a person." She smiled at Harry again, shaking her head at her brother's antics. Her shirt and shorts were wet from where the two of them had made contact and Harry forced his eyes back up to her face. She was so beautiful . . . It amazed him that she seemed to want to be with him at all. She must have a million boys who wanted to date her. He did not know why she was spending time with him. She started packing things into her bag again, blushing slightly, and Harry realized that she must feel his gaze on her face. She pulled a box of something out of the bag and called to John, who was running away from them over the grass. "Come get your snack!" She offered one of the bars to Harry. He took it and looked it over. It was, as he had thought, some kind of health bar granola thing. He was not sure he was brave enough to eat it.

"After his swimming lesson, he likes to play at the park for a few minutes," Cassie said hesitantly. "Would that be all right with you?"

"Sure. That's fine."

Harry sat on one of the benches near the play area and watched as she pushed John on the swing. He had opened up the granola bar and found that although it was a little dry it was okay to eat. Having finished it up, he looked around. He really needed a drink of water to wash it down with. There did not seem to be a water fountain around, and just as he had resigned himself to his thirst, Cassie came back and threw herself onto the bench next to him. "He still hasn't learned to push himself on the swing. I don't let him swing too much, it wears me out. Did you want a drink? Those make me really thirsty." Harry

nodded and she reached into her bag and pulled out her water bottle and handed it to him. "Hope you don't mind sharing. I forgot to throw one in for you." He drank, glad that she didn't mind sharing with him. She took a long drink after he did, and then blushed again when he looked at her.

"Cassie, I was wondering . . . " Oh, boy. Harry was not quite sure how to proceed. He wanted to spend more time with her but didn't want her to get tired of him. "I was wondering if, maybe tomorrow, we could get together again?" There, that had not sounded too desperate, had it? He hoped not.

"Well, I have plans tomorrow with some friends." Harry thought from her tone of voice that she was hoping he would ask if he could come along. He would have done just about anything she wanted, but he didn't dare take a chance meeting even more new people. He was already really pushing his luck. So, he pretended he had not been able to understand this unspoken invitation.

"Oh, too bad. Maybe another time, then." He really did feel badly. He knew that he would want to kick himself tomorrow while he sat in his house with nothing to do, remembering how he could have been with her.

"Well, actually, my mum wanted me to invite you to dinner again, if you want to come." She asked him very quietly. Harry could tell that she was really embarrassed about asking him again. She continued when he did not immediately decline the invitation. "You could come tomorrow night."

Harry pretended to think it over. He was definitely going to accept this time, but he wanted to tease her a little bit. He could suddenly understand why Ron found it so fun to tease Hermione. Teasing a girl who would get all flustered and aggravated in response was just about one of the most fun things he had done in a while. "Am I going to have eat sprouts and tofu?" He was not really sure what tofu was, but he did remember Uncle Vernon yelling about it one time when Petunia had suggested it for Dudley's diet.



She reacted just as he had thought she would. A slow flush crept up her neck and her eyes flashed. "I . . . My . . . She's a very good cook and no, she would not feed you tofu! She just tries to make sure we eat healthy! Is that so bad?" She was practically sputtering, seemingly defending her mother's honor against all challengers. "Is that why you said no the other day? You thought we'd feed you something nasty? Honestly, . . ." Harry put his hands up quickly as she looked like she was about to punch him.

"I'm kidding. I'm kidding." He hadn't meant to really hurt her feelings. "I had to turn you down the other night but it wasn't because I was afraid what you would serve me. Honest." She quieted down immediately. "I'm sure your mom is a good cook, just judging by all your great ideas." She seemed to take that as a compliment and an apology combined and smiled.

"All right. So you'll come?"

"Yeah. I'd love to. What time should I come over?"

"About 6, I think." She gathered her things together again and called John over. "Come on, we've got to go. Mum'll worry."

They walked home in silence, hands linked again in a way Harry had gotten used to, listening to John who was talking a mile a minute about all the things they had done in class. Cassie just made agreement noises when there was a pause in the steady flow of words and that seemed to start him going again. When they reached the house, Harry was not quite sure whether she would expect him to come in again or what, but it became a moot point when Cassie's mum came out on the porch, telling her that they had to leave immediately because a neighbor had called and she needed Cassie to come and help her with something. Cassie shrugged, laughing into Harry's eyes. He tugged gently on her hand and pulled her close to him. He put his arms carefully around her and hugged her, remembering how she had felt in his arms the last time. She didn't pull away. In fact, to his amazement, she stood on tiptoes, put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him briefly on the cheek. "I'll see

you tomorrow night then, Harry?" He nodded and watched bemused as she ran up the stairs and headed into the house.

## Chapter 15

### Fudging the News

"Anyway, I just thought you'd want to know . . ." Harry crumpled up the fifth piece of parchment and threw it in the general direction of the trash. He started again. "My scar hurt two times today. Nothing new there, but as it hasn't hurt since you brought me here I was kind of wondering if something was happening." He scanned the note. It had the right sort of sound to it, casual but it conveyed the important information. He nibbled nervously on the end of the quill, before he dipped it into the ink again and added, "Also, there was some explosion last night in greater London that I think must be related to Voldemort. What was it?" Harry hurriedly stuffed the note into an envelope and glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was 4:30 and he knew that if he hurried he could get this note into the afternoon post. He had already sent his usual morning note but he really wanted an answer to this explosion thing. Something about it was niggling in the back of his brain. He really hoped that Dumbledore would tell him he was wrong, that the explosion was just something completely Muggle, but he knew, deep down, that it wasn't.

After he returned from a very brief walk to the corner mailbox, Harry sat down on the couch and allowed himself to remember the afternoon's events. It had been wonderful with Cassie. He still couldn't believe that she wanted to see him again, tomorrow night. He had replayed the whole afternoon with her over and over again in his mind since he had left her an hour and a half ago. She had been so nice to talk to, not demanding much, just happy to have him there and happy to be there with him.

He got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. He was starving and now that the letter to Dumbledore was safely out in the mail, he could do something about his stomach. He had decided on the walk home from Cassie's that he really needed to write Dumbledore again tonight. He had come to realize this year that it was best to let the people who cared about him help out when he needed it; keeping stuff to himself just tended to get him into trouble.

After eating a sandwich, Harry sat down to watch the news. He had gotten into the habit of watching almost every evening to find out what was going on. He had initially hoped that it would keep him from sounding like an idiot if he needed to talk to a Muggle on the street. But tonight he had a special reason to pay attention. As he suspected, the explosion was discussed in the middle of the newscast, giving it just the right amount of weight to viewers who were mildly curious about the story but were not personally affected by it. He looked very carefully at the few pictures that were shown. Yes, there it was! Exactly! He grabbed the newspaper article again. This was the same exact photo from television. It was just that the shot on TV was a little wider and so he could see more of the man standing in the corner, just out of the camera's view. It was definitely Fudge. He recognized the hideous lime green bowler. Fudge always insisted on wearing that stupid thing, even when dressed in Muggle clothing. No question about it. The building that had blown up was not merely an abandoned warehouse.

Harry felt a great leap of triumph in his stomach. He was right! It was a cover-up for the sake of the Muggles! His anxieties surfaced again quickly, however, when he realized what this meant. Voldemort was on the move again. But, when he thought about it, he really had not expected anything less. No, the War was going full force without him there and it was quite certain the Voldemort had some devious plan in mind that was moving along nicely now that Harry was not there to interfere.

Leaning his head back on the chair cushion, Harry thought for the first time since he had woken in St. Mungo's about the fight nine nights ago, the night when he "died."

When the intelligence briefing had first come in from Bill Weasley three days before, everyone in the Order had laughed about it. There had to be some sort of mistake. Even Voldemort wouldn't be foolish enough to think that he could stroll into Gringott's Bank and take over. Could he? It was so well guarded! But, as the intelligence reports multiplied and stories were heard about how the Goblins were secretly supporting Voldemort and Fudge was blustering around, as usual, insisting that Lord Thingy wouldn't have the manpower to try it, they realized that the risk was too great not to go and try to stop him.

Bill was pretty convinced that something was going to happen that evening. Of course, Harry was not supposed to come. Absolutely not. He was used to that line of thinking, though. According to them, he was never supposed to go anywhere. And he presented them that evening with the identical argument he used every time. He had seriously thought about recording it somehow on some sort of magical disk and then he could just play the recording again and again when the Order needed to be convinced to let him go with them. He had meant to talk to Hermione about arranging it. The recording could go something like this:

"If He is there, if there is any chance, even a small one, that He is actually there, then I'm the only one who has a chance of finishing Him off. You are all as familiar with the Prophecy as I am. I am the only one who can do this. Now you can go in there. You can play wand-waving with the Death Eaters and you can maybe, maybe, drive them out of (suitable blank space for Harry to fill in the name of wherever they were going to fight) but you can't get rid of Him. That's my job. And sometime, you are going to have to let me do it. Maybe (another suitable blank space for Harry to fill in the time of day when the fight was supposed to happen) is it. So stop arguing."

It usually took several repetitions of these same basic arguments before someone saw the logic behind it and he got to come along on whatever mission was planned. This particular time, it had taken a whole lot of arguing. But, as always, they had eventually given in. It was Moody this time that promised never to let Harry out of his sight. It was always one of them. And Harry knew, knew with every particle of his being, that when they did that, that person was promising to die for him. He dropped his head into his hands. It was too much, too much. He wasn't worth it. All these good people were willing to fight beside him, give their lives for him. And what did he offer in return? He was mildly surprised to feel the wetness on his cheeks. He hadn't cried for a year. He never wanted to cry about anyone ever again.

It had been real; that was obvious 10 minutes after they walked into the bank. It was closing time and they had mingled in with the diminishing crowd of wizards bustling about making last minute deposits and withdrawals. They were just going to give up and go back to headquarters when Lucius Malfoy had walked in and

somehow his entrance had been a signal. All hell had broken loose. Harry didn't remember much about the details of the fighting. He knew it had been fast and furious. He had used a lot of defense, not too much offense. He was kind of holding back, hiding in the shadows; Moody was also, waiting to see if the big guy was going to dare to show up. Of course, he had, and of course, Harry and he had fought. Both Harry and Voldemort had long ago learned that their wands were not able to be used against each other but they had each developed techniques that did not require direct wand use against each other. In some ways, it was more vicious than any other fighting. And Harry had seen a lot of vicious.

Harry stood up, pulling himself back into the present with an unpleasant wrench. It was late now and he felt more tired than he had in a very long time. He had failed again. Most people considered it a successful mission when he faced Voldemort and survived but Harry knew better. Survival only allowed them to meet again another time. Sometimes he felt like his entire existence narrowed down to one fact. He was doomed to face Him again and again. There was never going to be an end to this nightmare.

His temples were throbbing. He needed to go to bed. He had been in too much shock and surprise when Dumbledore had brought him here to even ask about Moody, much less everyone else who had gone to the bank with them that night. Now he felt sick. Harry supposed it was possible one of them, or maybe more, had finally done what they had sworn to do and died so that he, Harry Potter, could live to try to fight Lord Voldemort another time. That had happened before. And it probably would again. It would keep going, endlessly, until either he or Voldemort murdered the other. Pleasant thought. He managed to get his clothes off before he collapsed onto the bed, knowing even as he did so, that he would regret not pulling the curtains in the morning.

Harry and Arthur Weasley were walking down the dingy street toward an even dingier telephone box. They stepped inside and Harry dialed the number. 62442. The cool female voice spoke. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business." Harry was the only one who spoke. "Harry Potter. Here for another rescue mission." The badge saying "Harry Potter, Rescue Mission" emerged,

as always, from the coin return slot on the phone. Harry attached it to the front of his robes. As they descended to the lobby, Harry was reminded by the same cool female voice that he needed to register his wand at the security desk. Harry was extremely surprised then because when they got out of the phone box into what should have been the gleaming lobby of the Ministry of Magic, they were in the main entrance hall of Hogwarts. Mr. Weasley did not seem surprised at the unexpected change of destination. They got out and walked toward the Great Hall. Harry heard a familiar high-pitched laugh and turned to Mr. Weasley. " Lord Voldemort is in there, Mr. Weasley." But it wasn't Mr. Weasley anymore; it was Lucius. Malfoy and he was grinning evilly with his wand pointed right at Harry's heart. "So He is, Potter. So He is."/i

Harry sat straight up in bed, sweating and panting. He hated dreaming, hated it with a passion. He took some comfort in the realization that this did not feel like a dream Voldemort had planted in his brain. Those had been . . . well, horrendous was the word that sprang to mind. They were always full of torture and a great deal of screaming. This dream had just been strange. However, Harry had taken enough of the old bat Trelawney's divination classes to realize that this dream probably meant something. He even kind of wished he had that terrible book "Dream Oracle" that Trelawney had forced the fifth-year Gryffindors to read two years before to help him figure it out. But not tonight. Tonight, he needed to sleep. Old habits are really hard to break, though. He grabbed his glasses off the bedside table, stumbled into the living room, flipped on the lamp, and scribbled the main elements of the dream down on a scrap of parchment. He only barely managed to make it back into his bedroom before he collapsed into bed again.

When he awoke in the morning, his mouth felt dry and his head ached. He couldn't get his eyes to focus right, even after he put his glasses on. He had found them under the pillow and he didn't want to try to remember how they had gotten there. He vaguely remembered having a dream that had upset him somehow; however, he decided he was really not up to analyzing it this morning. Maybe after breakfast, . . . or maybe lunch. The Cornflakes made him feel a little better. But what really helped him push away the drifting fog of

gloominess was remembering that tonight . . . Well, tonight he would be seeing Cassie again.



## Chapter 16

### Meeting the Robinsons

At 5:30 that evening, Harry tried one more time to force his black hair to lie down. He was used to its constantly untidy appearance but was a little nervous about meeting Cassie's parents looking like he had never even heard of the word "comb." There was no help for it, though. It was just going to have to look like this. He stepped out of the door and hurried down the steps, hearing the house collapse behind him with a small pop. He started walking toward Cassie's house and thought back over the events of what had turned into a fairly busy day.

He had heard from Dumbledore through Sir Lionel by 10 a.m., responding to his note from the night before. Harry couldn't believe the note had gotten all the way to Hogwarts in that amount of time by owl post, but Sir Lionel had called to him from his frame before Harry had even dragged up enough energy to get into the shower. Dumbledore had assured Harry that things were going just as he had expected. The explosion had been at a small building belonging to the Ministry of Magic that was separate from the main set of offices which were located (as Harry knew well) in downtown London. Everyone knew Voldemort had been behind the explosion and most people, Sir Lionel had confirmed, believed that it had been an attempt to let the Ministry leadership know it was not untouchable. Harry could imagine that Fudge had gotten the message loud and clear. As for the pain starting again in his scar, Dumbledore had been quick to reassure Harry he was absolutely right.

Voldemort had apparently taken a bit of a "holiday" after Harry's supposed death. No one was sure why. Dumbledore explained his personal belief was that Voldemort had been very suspicious and had gone into hiding until he had felt more confident that Harry was really gone. Now, though, he seemed to be very confident that this particular thorn in his side named Potter had been removed and he was becoming active again in celebration. The Death Eaters seemed to be moving more freely now and some wizards who had been fence-sitters were joining the Dark side, assuming that now Harry was dead, it was just a matter of time before Voldemort once again

would control everything in the wizarding world. Harry was not as calm about this bit of news as Dumbledore seemed to be. Sir Lionel's final words, however, had made Harry feel a little bit better. "Harry, I am very pleased with how things are going. I just want to tell you to keep up the good work. Don't do anything differently than you are doing now."

Harry knew, of course, that Dumbledore was not telling him to keep seeing Cassie, but he took encouragement from the statement that he was doing all right. He decided that as long as he was as careful in the future when he was out of the house with her as he had been up to this point, he was not taking too many unnecessary risks.

Harry stopped and took a deep breath. He had arrived at his destination. He straightened his collar and out of habit double-checked that his bangs were adequately covering his scar. He supposed that it did not matter whether they saw it or not as Cassie knew it was there and may have even already told her parents about it. He rang the doorbell. He hoped that he would not embarrass himself tonight. He would undoubtedly have to carry on some conversation and he hoped he would not trip over his own words or get himself into trouble. He had tried to think about what sort of questions Cassie's parents might ask him and had even tried out a few answers, staring into the mirror above the bathroom sink and trying to look very sincere. He had felt like he had failed miserably, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could not confess to being a wizard which meant that almost everything else he was going to tell them tonight was going to be a lie. The door opened and he looked into Cassie's face. She was smiling her incredible smile and Harry knew that any risks he had to take were well worth it.

"I'm so glad you're here, Harry." She stepped closer to him, and he reached for her hand. He desperately wanted to hug her again but decided that with her parents right inside the house it might be getting dinner off to a bad start. She looked him up and down as they stood there. "I like those clothes. I've never seen you in anything but jeans." Harry felt suddenly very self-conscious. He had shopped for a new outfit that afternoon, figuring that a dinner invitation would require a more dressy ensemble than he had needed up to this point. He had gotten some dark gray dress pants and an emerald green and cream

subtly-striped short-sleeved collared shirt. The salesgirl had assured him that he looked very nice in it, that it brought out the green of his eyes. She had been quite forward with him, actually, and Harry had blushed frantically several times as she kept insisting on touching him in ways that Harry found disconcerting. He had been working very hard to keep his wand concealed but if she kept putting her hands on him, she was bound to feel it and somehow Harry did not think she would be satisfied the vague "good luck charm" explanation he had managed with Cassie.

Back at the apartment that afternoon, Harry had thought over what the salesgirl had said and done. He had never considered himself particularly good looking and was pretty sure most girls of his acquaintance agreed with his assessment. They often laughed and teased with him but he was hardly fending off love-struck girls with a stick. However, he recalled, people who had known his father often talked about how popular he had been when he was Harry's age. They also said that Harry looked just like him except for his eyes. Harry had therefore come to the conclusion, after considering this line of thinking, that he must be fairly acceptable looking. That thought had made him blush and pace around the apartment for a while, full of energy that he could not expend.

So, with Cassie here and his feelings of confidence greatly increased today, he smiled down at her and bent low to whisper next to her ear, something he normally would never have been brave enough to do. "I'm glad you like them. You look pretty fantastic yourself." She was wearing some sort of shimmery red sun dress that fitted her slender curves nicely down to her waist, after which it dropped into a swishy skirt that ended right below her knee. Her arms were bare and her blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail which left her neck completely exposed and Harry had a crazy desire to touch the pulse that beat right above her collarbone; he only just managed to keep his hand under control. She was wearing flat sandals and Harry was reminded again just how much taller he was than she. The top of her head reached just to his ears and Harry knew from past experience that if he pulled her close enough, her cheek would fit perfectly against his shoulder. They both seemed unaware of the fact they were standing out on her front porch with her family watching through the windows and were instead just concentrating on each other.

After a moment or two, Harry felt a small body throw itself against his legs; he stumbled backward and the connection was broken. "Harry. Mum said I could sit next to you at dinner. I did good at swimming lessons today and Mom said I could if I behaved." Harry was surprised at John's enthusiasm about his presence. Yesterday afternoon, he had practically ignored Harry, concentrating instead on trying to talk his sister's ears off. But despite that, John's slender body was pressed up against Harry's legs, holding on to him like it was for dear life. He picked John up and carried the giggling boy into the house, following Cassie.

"Mum, Dad, I'd like you to meet Harry. Harry, these are my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. Of course, you met Mum yesterday." Harry held out his hand to her father. "Hello. I'm Harry Evans." He had practiced saying this new name over and over again today. He had decided his mother would be happy that he had reverted to using her maiden name for this foray into the Muggle world and he thought this sounded better than other possibilities. He had tried a variety, Black being his first choice; he had decided against this as it made him melancholy. He had also tried Weasley (too unusual), Granger (uh, no), Longbottom (he had laughed out loud), and Lupin (just sounded like a werewolf). He had finally settled on Evans and liked to think the warmth that filled his chest as he had practiced saying the name over and over again was his mother telling him that he was perfectly wonderful.

His hand was swallowed in a very large hand with a firm grip and Harry immediately felt comfortable with this man. He was as friendly and open as his wife had been yesterday, and they both seemed to feel that if Cassie liked Harry, then that was about as good a recommendation as he could get. Harry also met the other brother, Matthew. He was 11 and Harry was forcefully reminded of how small and scared the first years, also 11, always looked as they came into the Great Hall at Hogwarts for the sorting. Had he really been that young once? It seemed like an eternity ago. But Matthew was friendly and curious, seemingly anxious to get in a teasing remark or two about Cassie that he had prepared carefully in advance. In fact, he reminded Harry a great deal of the Weasley twins, except that there was only one of him. Probably safer that way.

Mrs. Robinson announced that dinner was ready right now and that they should sit down if they wanted it while it was hot and Harry was led into a very attractive dining room which seemed to have absorbed the warmth and friendliness of this family and enfolded Harry into welcoming arms. He had only felt this at home this quickly in one other house and it certainly wasn't the Dursley's stuffy surgically clean residence on Privet Drive. It was the Burrow, and the feeling of homecoming was so reminiscent of that first-ever step into the Weasley's kitchen that Harry would not have been at all surprised to see any of the red-headed Weasley clan bound in at a moment's notice and take a seat, waiting to be fed.

## Chapter 17

### Dinner and a Movie

Although he would not have admitted it to Cassie for the world, Harry was a little bit nervous about what he would be served for dinner tonight. His only experience in the past with "eating healthy" had been when Dudley was on a diet and Petunia's idea of supporting his dieting was to make everyone in the family starve. Harry had been expected to survive on quarter grapefruits, carrot sticks, small bits of cottage cheese, etc for a whole summer. He probably would have died, he had thought at the time, if it had not been for his friends sending him care packages of sweets. Looking at the table tonight, though, he felt reassured. There was a great deal of food on the table and no grapefruit or cottage cheese seemed to be on the menu. He stood hesitantly just inside the door of the dining room, unsure of where he should sit. John bounded directly to a chair and called out to him, "Come on, Harry, come sit by me. Here! Here!" He was shaking the chair next to him with excitement. Harry walked over to it, unsure if someone would protest his sitting there. No one did, so he sat down, looking up to find Cassie heading over to the chair on his other side. But before she could actually sit, Matthew slid under her arm and planted himself on the seat, grabbed a slice of bread, and began eating with gusto. Harry stared at him in surprise. Cassie was looking equally shocked and unsure of quite what to say. Matthew just concentrated on eating. A moment later, Mr. Robinson looked up and noticed Matthew.

"Matthew, get out of that chair."

"Why?" His look of studied innocence convinced Harry that this was a plot to embarrass his sister rather than an oversight.

"Harry is Cassie's guest, Matthew. She would like to sit by him."

"I thought she said that he was just a friend, just someone who she thought should not be alone all the time. Just earlier, she said . . ."

Cassie's hands immediately covered his mouth before he could get out one more word and Harry thought to himself that he would very much like to know what she had said just earlier.

"Matthew." There was a definite warning tone in Mr. Robinson's voice.

Matthew forced Cassie's hands away from his mouth but apparently knew better than to continue his earlier sentence. "What? Is he her boyfriend?" The last word was drawled out as if implying that the whole concept of his sister actually having a boyfriend was ridiculous. Harry saw Cassie out of the corner of his eye, but did not turn to look at her. Her color was very high and her eyes were bright, like she was not sure whether she wanted to scream in anger or run away in embarrassment. Harry felt terribly bad for her although he thought the whole situation was rather funny than humiliating.

"Get up and out of that chair, or you will be having no dinner tonight at all." His voice was firm, and Matthew apparently decided that the invisible line had been reached. He got up, pretending disappointment, and sat at the last available chair, across the table from Harry. Cassie sat down and her hands were shaking as she unfolded her napkin onto her lap. She was biting her lower lip. She looked up from her hands and gave him a sort of half-smile. He smiled back at her, hoping that it would reassure her that he wasn't mad at all and that he understood how it was with siblings. He had seen enough good-natured teasing among all the Weasleys to not be too surprised at Matthew's behavior.

Harry felt like it was up to him to break the rather uncomfortable silence that had descended around the table. Cassie's mum was still in the kitchen dishing up the rest of dinner, he imagined, and no one else seemed to quite know what to say. He cleared his throat and said, "I've never had little brothers to fight with or play with, so maybe after dinner, the two of you and I can do something fun." John squealed in enthusiasm, immediately launching into a recitation of the video games they had available and his high scores and Harry looked over at Cassie. She was still quite red in the face although her shoulders had relaxed a little bit. Harry reached for her hand, prying her clenched fingers from around her napkin. He squeezed her fingers a little bit and mouthed, "It's all right." She smiled a little grateful smile at him. Just then, Mrs. Robinson entered with a big platter of food and the tense atmosphere broke completely as everyone started helping themselves to the food.

The food was fantastic, some sort of chicken dish with spinach, brown rice, and a huge bowl of salad. He had taken three bites of the chicken and tried the rice when the questions started. He tried to relax. He had expected it.

"So, Harry. Tell us a little bit about yourself." Well, that was vague. Harry swallowed the rice he had been chewing and concentrated on the answers he had prepared earlier.

"I'm sure Cassie told you that my parents were killed when I was a baby . . . . So, I've got one more year of school and then I guess I'll concentrate on finding a job." The tale had been fairly easy to tell, really. He had not lied about anything, just tried to give generalizations and leave out details that were too specific. He ate the remainder of the chicken on his plate and was in the process of getting another piece when the second question was sent his direction.

"Where do you go to school?" He had thought earlier about saying Smeltings, at least it was a real boarding school. But the thought of their thinking for even a moment that he had ever gone to such a horrid place had dissuaded him from that course.

"It's a small private school that I am sure you would never have heard about."

"Around London somewhere?"

"Uh, no, actually. It's up north, in Scotland, northern Scotland." Mr. Robinson and even Cassie looked a little surprised at this. Harry understood that and could respect their slight confusion.

"Well, then why are you here? In London, I mean." Cassie asked him quietly and Harry dared to hope for a second that she looked a little crestfallen. Maybe she had hoped that they could see . . . but then Mrs. Robinson weighed in with a comment.

"Cassie told us that you took an astronomy class in school." Harry was grateful for her interruption and the chance to change the subject.



He seized on it with enthusiasm. "Oh, yes. It's really a great class. Of course, it's fairly difficult learning to track all the stars and planets and things. It was three years before I could consistently find Neptune. I always got it confused with . . ." Harry's voice trailed off into silence. Both Cassie and her mum were looking at him strangely although her dad was busy talking to John and hadn't heard his statement, apparently. Harry had to think carefully over what he had said that had caused those expressions. He suddenly realized. He had said that he had taken astronomy for at least three years. That probably hadn't been the most intelligent thing to admit. He thought for a second over what he could say to cover for that mistake but had not settled on anything when Mrs. Robinson again spoke up to change the subject.

"I've always loved the stars. I'm sure Cassie told you that she has never forgiven me for naming her . . ."

"Mother." Cassie interrupted. "Harry says he knows lots of people named after stars and things. So, he doesn't think my name is weird at all. He likes it." She met his gaze fully, lifting her chin a little as if daring him to take back those things he had said yesterday at the pool.

"I do like it, Mrs. Robinson. I think it's a beautiful name." J

ohn started chanting a little rhyme about "Pia, pia, she's a pain, . . ." but was shushed immediately by a stern look from his mother and he put a piece of lettuce in his mouth with a bored look.

There was a comfortable silence again around the table as they kept eating their dinner. Small talk rose to fill the void and Harry listened and made the occasional comment. Harry had moved onto his third piece of chicken when Mr. Robinson asked a question that Harry had not prepared for, and he was grateful that he had a few moments' grace as he chewed and swallowed.

"You mentioned getting a job after you were done with school. What exactly do you want to do with your life?"

Harry actually wanted to be an Auror, a dark wizard hunter, and was taking the N.E.W.T. classes that would allow him to do that. He could not, however, say that tonight. "Um, well. I'm kind of thinking about law enforcement." That was true, he thought, they would just assume something else.

"You mean like being a lawyer?" Harry realized that the subject was not going to be dropped that easily. "Or the police?"

"No, I'm thinking . . . Well, more like a detective, I guess. You know, tracking down bad guys."

"Would you work for the government, then?" Harry was not quite sure what to say to this question. He did not want to make another misstatement.

"Well, that's an option. I'd have to go for more schooling, of course . . ." Harry hoped that this vague answer would satisfy. It seemed to answer Mr. Robinson's question, but Matthew had leapt onto his last answer with more enthusiasm than he had shown since he had been banished to his seat across the table.

"You could be a spy, Harry! A spy like 007! Like Bond! Ooooh, that would be so cool! Think of all the neat little gadgets you could use! Man, I'd love that." Everyone was smiling and nodding at that comment although Harry was not exactly sure what he was talking about. Harry nodded, too, like he had some idea what Matthew had meant.

"Yeah, maybe."

Cassie explained. "He went a couple days ago to see the new Bond movie. He can't stop talking about it, now. Have you had a chance to see it yet?" Harry was completely out of his depth with this conversation. He did recognize the word movie, though.

"No, haven't had a chance."

"I hear it's very good." Cassie was staring determinedly at her plate and Harry wondered what was bothering her. She had been her usual

animated self through most of the meal, although he could tell she was embarrassed when her parents were questioning him, like somehow she had subjected him to this torture. But now she seemed anxious for something, like she was waiting . . . Suddenly, Harry remembered a conversation he had had with Cho Chang in the winter of his fifth year. She had mentioned about an upcoming Hogsmeade weekend and Harry had thought it was strictly for informational purposes. It had taken Harry a little while to realize that she was hoping he would ask her to go with him. This was exactly the same pattern. Did girls read books to learn this stuff or what?

"I'm sure it is. Would you like to go see it together?" He felt like a bit of a fool asking her out in front of her whole family, but she smiled her dazzling smile and accepted and all those feelings were swept away in the flood of pleasure that she had just agreed to go out on a date with him. An actual date.

His feelings of euphoria only lasted a second, though, because she immediately said, "Maybe we could go tonight after dinner." It wasn't that he minded going with her, not at all. It was just that he was hoping he could figure out a little more about movies in general and what one did with a girl at one and something about this Bond, and well, everything. If they went tonight, he'd have no time to get ready. No reprieve was forthcoming; however. Even John's disappointed cries that Harry had promised to play with them did not do it. Apparently, going to see the newest "Bond movie" with Cassie was thought by one and all to be a very fun way for Harry to spend an evening and both parents were not going to let anything interfere.

While Mr. and Mrs. Robinson tidied up the kitchen, they insisted that the boys as well as Harry and Cassie go into the living room. Harry sat down on the couch and John climbed all over him, yammering loudly about some television show. Harry listened carefully but did not really understand what he was talking about. Matthew had left the room and came back a few minutes later carrying some drawings that he had made that he wanted Harry to see. Harry liked having the kids around, but really wanted to talk to Cassie privately for a minute.

Harry knew that he would have to do something about getting them to the movie but he really was at a loss about quite what to do. The

boys had moved on to showing him their various toys while John was insisting that he play a video game but Cassie slipped out of the room and Harry was not sure what to do. He wanted to follow her, but didn't want to embarrass her if she had gone into her bedroom or something. She came out a minute later smiling with what looked like the day's newspaper in her hand. "Let's decide what movie we want to see, all right?" Harry was kind of surprised at that. He thought that had already been decided.

She sat down next to him on the couch, and opened the paper to a page full of advertisements about movies. Harry recognized a few of the names from advertisements he had seen on television. Then, to his surprise, she leaned against his shoulder and held up the paper. "I think the 8:15, what do you think? That's a great theater and we can get there easily on the tube."

Harry tried to get his voice to work, but the feel of her leaning against him was rather distracting. "Um, yes. That sounds good." He leaned a little closer to her ear. He really did have to ask her something.

"Cassie. I haven't been to a movie for a long time. Do you think 45 pounds will be enough for everything?" He only had that much money with him because it was left over from his shopping trip earlier that afternoon.

She laughed quietly and leaned back against him a little more. "It should be okay. As long as I don't make you buy me a large popcorn." She hopped up and walked into the kitchen to tell her parents and Harry was left sitting there, thinking that he would be perfectly content just to sit on this couch all evening with her as long as she leaned against him like that.

## Chapter 18

### Posters, Popcorn, and Pleasantries

Twenty minutes later, Harry and Cassie left her house, heading to the Underground station that was not terribly far away. It was only 7:15 but Cassie told him they should get to the theater early because there would probably be large crowds. Harry would have begged off right then but reminded himself that chances were extremely slim that wizards would be attending a Muggle movie. After all, in all of his time he had spent in the wizarding world, he had never heard anyone mention going to the movies as a possible entertainment. Of course, he knew there was no theater in Hogsmeade so maybe it just wasn't an option at school.

They didn't say much as they walked along, feeling perfectly happy just to be together. The sun was still up even though the shadows were getting longer. Harry was quite nervous about the evening ahead, hoping that he would not do anything that made him stand out in this large crowd of people and hoping if he did, Cassie would cover for him. Cassie reached over and took his hand. He relaxed a bit. His fingers slipped between hers and he tugged her a little closer.

"Tonight was really great. I love your family. Your brother Matthew is quite the jokester, isn't he?" Cassie nodded and blushed a little bit at the reminder of Matthew's antics before dinner. Harry still wanted to know what it was that she had said before he got there. However, he decided he would wait and ask that later. So he moved onto a safer subject. "Your mum really is a fantastic cook, Cassie. You come by it naturally." She laughed.

"You've never eaten a single thing I've ever cooked. So you don't know if I'm a good cook or not."

"True."

"But sometime I could cook for you. My mum doesn't know, but I make really wicked chocolate biscuits."

"Ah. Sure, that sounds great." Harry smiled to himself. She apparently had gotten over her campaign to see that he ate only healthy items and had even hinted that she would be eating junk food with him at the theater later. He hoped he had enough money with him. She had never really answered his question about the money but there was nothing he could do about it now. They reached the station and bought the tickets for the train. It was fairly crowded as they descended to the platform, and Harry hoped they wouldn't have to wait too long.

"Looks like it will be about five minutes," Cassie said, glancing at the electronic signs by the tracks. "Good. That should get us to the theater in plenty of time." She paused. "Harry," her voice was a little hesitant, "Now that I think about it, I kind of feel like maybe I forced you into this tonight." Harry was just trying to formulate an answer to that when a crowd of people forced their way past the two of them and pushed her right into him. He let his arms slide around her waist and pulled her back against him. He decided right then that maybe being in crowded places was not such a bad idea after all. She leaned into him, her hands on his. "We sure seem destined to be pushed together all the time. I must have a target on me or something."

Harry laughed. "Well, I'm not going to complain. I like being close to you." She smelled really good, as always. He wasn't sure if it was her shampoo or the soap that she used. He bent his head to her neck, intent on finding out if it was just her hair or if it was on her skin, also. But before he could really get close enough to tell, she moved.

"I like being close to you, too." She separated a little bit from him, though, and turned so that she was looking up into his face. "You have never told me what this is. Are you ever planning to?" Her hand had once again sought out and found his wand. Harry moved her hand quickly, but she would not be deterred, twisting her hand from his and once again laying it over the handle of his wand right under his heart. Her eyes were very blue and big as they looked into his and he realized he probably could not put it off any longer.

"I'm sorry, Cassie. I'll tell you. I really will. Just not now. I can't really talk about it now."

"Why not? No one is paying any attention to us."

"Well, it's . . . Well, it's kind of complicated." Harry was feeling very nervous now. Who knew what sort of people were around them on this crowded platform? "I promise, Cassie, we'll talk about it soon. Really. As soon as we're somewhere with a little more privacy." He was grateful the train arrived right then and they pushed through the crowd of people to get onto one of the cars. The train was as crowded as the platform had been, and Harry felt rather aggravated they could not sit down somewhere.

Cassie had to yell pretty loudly to be heard over the roar of the train moving through the tunnel. "It's only about 15 minutes to our stop! Let's just stand!" They both grabbed a pole a little further up the car, and he made sure his fingers were overlaying hers as they hurtled along. There was really no way to have a conversation so Harry spent his time watching her. She looked fantastic in that red dress and he was glad she hadn't changed out of it. Her mum had suggested that she change into more casual clothes to go to the movies, but she had decided not to because Harry had to stay dressed up. A few bits of hair had fallen out of the ponytail and were curling around her face. He reached out to her and tucked one of the thicker ones behind her ear. She smiled up at him gratefully and he noticed that she was once again worrying her lower lip with her teeth. Apparently, she did this when she was thinking hard about something or distressed. He squeezed her hand a little on the pole and let his other hand brush her cheek. She smiled.

Their stop came up very quickly, and they got off the train. This station was a lot quieter and Harry was grateful for the silence as they exited the platform, heading for street level. Cassie did not bring up the subject of his wand again immediately, and he was glad. On the street, there were quite a few people walking toward the brightly lit theater ahead. His watch gave a time of 7:40 so he thought they would have plenty of time to get into the movie before it started. There was a little bit of a line as they queued up in front of the ticket booth and Harry listened carefully as the people in front of him bought their tickets. "Two, please, for the 8:15 Bond."

"Read the sign, pal. That one's sold out."

Harry looked at Cassie with a little panicked expression. He had no idea what he should do now. She smiled reassuringly at him, "It's okay. Let's just do the 8:45."

"Uh, alright. 8:45, then," he said to the teenager. This seemed to do the trick because two tickets got pushed under the window after Harry sent in his money. He realized he really had been foolish to worry about the money. He had plenty. He took Cassie's hand again as they entered the theater. She led him over to a wall on the far side of the lobby where there was yet another queue. "We'll have to wait here a while before we can actually get in to sit down." They talked for a few minutes as they waited.

"So, Cassie, I've been dying to ask you, ever since Matthew brought it up. . ." Harry raised an eyebrow at her and she flushed immediately. As he suspected, she knew exactly what it was he wanted to know. She shook her head.

"I'm not going to say. I can't be forced to incriminate myself." She was literally about the color of her dress. Harry decided that this must be worth pursuing. He crowded her a little, and bent close.

"Come on, you can tell me."

She shook her head again. "My lips are sealed. I won't talk."

"Well, I guess I could always ask Matthew when we get back to your house tonight."

"He'll be in bed by then."

"You're being awfully stubborn about this." Harry thought for a minute. He was in a public place and didn't want to draw attention to himself, so he backed off a bit. She relaxed and he decided that this was the moment to make his move. He grabbed her hand, and brought it up to his chest. He took his index finger and started running it across her palm, carefully tracing her lifeline as he had been taught to do in Trelawney's class. As he suspected, she was a little ticklish there and



before too long, she was squirming, trying to pull her hand away, laughing.

"All right, I'll talk. I'll talk. Just stop that."

"So, talk." He stopped tickling her hand and held it in his instead.

"I just said . . ." She flushed again and he moved his finger to encourage her to keep talking.

She said the next sentence very quickly, like if she got it out fast in wouldn't be as embarrassing. "I just said I think you are really cute and that I hoped that maybe we could, uh, well, date. And I hoped that you would think I was cute, too." He laughed quietly.

"Well, and here we are on an official date. And I do think you are very pretty. So all your wishes have come true at once, kind of like Christmas." She flushed and relaxed against him. He held her weight for a few minutes as she buried her face against his shoulder.

"I think this is even better than Christmas." Harry smiled above her head. He had to agree. They stood there for a few minutes, marveling at how lucky they both were to be there together. After a minute, Harry remembered that he wanted to ask her something else.

"Cassie, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what?"

"Well, I assumed that the movie was going to be longer than 30 minutes. I thought it was more like a couple hours or something." She started laughing, and Harry realized he had probably said something really stupid. But, as always, her laugh did strange things to his insides and he knew she didn't mind even when he did sound like a fool.

"They are showing it on different screens, Harry. This theater has the movie going on right now that probably started at about 6:00 or so. When that film gets out, we'll go in. The movie is about two hours."

"Oh, sorry. I just. . . ."

"It's okay. I don't mind. It's obvious that you haven't been to many movies."

"Yeah. I think this might be the first, actually. I certainly don't remember ever going to one before. Not in the theater."

"You have got to be kidding me." The line started moving before Harry could assure her that he was completely serious. They stood for a couple moments in front of a wall advertising all the movies playing at that time.

"Here, Harry. This is the poster for the movie. Tomorrow Never Dies. It looks great, doesn't it?" Harry let his eyes wander all over the poster. It did look fairly exciting. The hero, Bond, he assumed, looked suitably daring and the two women on the poster looked very attractive. "Of course," Cassie continued, "I've always thought Pierce Brosnan would make the perfect Bond. I was so glad when he started doing the films. He's dreamy." Harry assumed that this Brosnan character was the tall, dark, handsome man on the poster. He felt a stab of irrational jealousy at Cassie's praise for him. Then his eyes focused on the words across the top of the poster, right under the title and he felt a sudden thrill on the back of his neck.

"Who's James?"

"What?" Cassie had not followed his sudden shift of conversation.

"James. It says here, 'Watch as James once again saves the world.'"

"Well, James Bond, of course. Bond, James Bond." She looked at him and Harry tried hard to regain some composure. It had just come as such a shock.

"That was my dad's name."

"What?" She asked again.

"James. My dad's name was James."

"Oh. I'm sorry . . . I guess I just assumed. . . . Well, I mean everybody knows James Bond, don't they?"

"Not me. I've never heard of him before." Harry was tired of bluffing his way around this. He had enough stuff that he was going to have to lie to her about. He was going to at least be honest about this.

"Okay." She paused, "I guess if you really don't want to see . . . . We could just . . ." She truly looked distraught and Harry felt immediately like the biggest prat in the world. After all, it wasn't like the name James was copyrighted or anything. It was a very common name.

"No. Cassie. I'm sorry. I didn't want to admit how stupid I am about all this sort of stuff. I just thought it would be easier to go along with your brother when he started talking about it, and then I didn't want to admit . . . how stupid I can be about these things. But I do really want to go to the movie with you. It looks fantastic. It really does."

They made their way into the theater where the movie would be starting in about 45 minutes and found seats in the middle of a row about a third of the way from the back of the theater. "Is this all right?" Cassie asked as they sat down. He nodded vaguely because he had no idea. "Just tell me one thing, Harry." He looked over at her and saw she was smiling again. He was glad because her next words came as truly a shock. "Are you an alien from outer space or something? Sometimes you seem like you have absolutely no clue about normal everyday things. Like someone told you how to act human, but didn't fill in all the details." Harry thought this was a pretty accurate description of how he felt. Of course, he couldn't really tell her the reason for this complete detachment from what she would consider normal.

"No, I am definitely not an alien." Harry could not believe she had actually asked him that. But, then he thought, he might be getting suspicious, also, if the situation were reversed. He realized they were alone in the row and that the other people in the theater were a distance away. "I'm not an alien, Cassie. It's just that my school is a little isolated and the curriculum is a little, um, peculiar so I don't have a chance to do what you might think are normal things." She seemed

to be accepting of this explanation, so he pressed forward. "And my aunt had a policy that if she could do anything to make me happy, that thing was to be avoided at all costs." She grinned a little lopsided grin like she always did when he said something like that. He had given up trying to convince her that this was actually truly how Petunia and Vernon had thought. "Anyway, so she never took me places or had me do things with her and as a result, I don't really know a whole lot about, uh, well, you know cultural sorts of things."

Cassie was nodding. "I guess that makes sense." There was a slight pause and then she shifted gears completely. "Your school really must be kind of odd. Did you really take three years of astronomy?"

Oh, great. She remembered that. The girl had a mind like a trap. Nothing passed her by and Harry felt an irrational surge of pleasure to think about how bright she was. "Yes. Well, okay, actually five years of it. But I'm done now. Haven't taken it this last year and won't again."

"Wow. You must be an expert. That's incredible. Maybe sometime we could look at my constellation. You said that you could find it easily." Harry nodded. That sounded really nice. They settled into their chairs a little and Harry suddenly remembered that she had mentioned something about popcorn.

"Did you want some popcorn or something?" Harry hoped he was not going to have to get it himself. He did not know exactly what he was doing here, either. But she willingly went with him to the snack counter and they got a decent sized popcorn (although Harry was still full from dinner and told her as much) a couple of drinks, and Harry even splurged and got a package of candy that he had not had for years. Cassie seemed fairly enthused about the candy and Harry remembered the chips a few days before and teased that he would have to buy another package of candy just for her, but she promised, eyes flashing, that she would share this time. When they got back into the theater, their seats were still available and amazingly still fairly isolated from the rest of the people.

"I guess this show isn't going to sell out tonight." Cassie said, looked around in surprise. "I guess we could have stayed home a little longer."

"That's all right. It's a little easier to talk here, anyway." Harry leaned back against his chair and reached for her hand again, staring unseeingly at the curtains that covered what he supposed was the movie screen. He supposed it was time, now, to deal with the subject of his wand. "I promised we would talk about this." He indicated his shirt and the wand underneath it. "What do you think it is, Cassie?"

"I . . . Well, I think you, . . . well, it sounds stupid, . . .but it's like it gives you protection or something."

"Yeah, that's kind of what it is." Harry sighed. "I really can't explain the whole thing. It's just too complicated. I can only tell you that I need to keep it with me all the time or something bad could happen. I honestly can't explain anything more than that." He glanced sideways at her. She was just looking at him with a slight smile. "You are just going to have to know that I have it and that you aren't going to know what it's for. Can you live with that?" He closed his eyes. If she got up and left him now, he would really not blame her. To his surprise, though, rather than leave, she just raised their interlocked fingers to her mouth and pressed a kiss against his knuckles.

He felt lightning shoot from his knuckles down his arm and right to his lungs. He caught his breath. "So, Harry, I basically have a choice. I can either be with you and not know why you carry a stick around with you or not be with you at all." She spoke slowly like she was weighing every word before she said it.

"Yeah." His voice came out a bit croaky.

"Oh." She didn't say anything for a minute. "I'd already decided that I would rather get to know you with all your secrets - and you do have a lot of secrets, Harry - than not know you at all. I'll take what I can get." Harry sat there, absolutely flattened by what she had just said. The amount of trust in her eyes was incredible. "I just ask one thing. Don't lie to me. If you can't answer a question or can't explain something, than just tell me and I won't ask again. But I want to know

that what you do tell me I can believe." Harry thought about this for a minute.

"I think I can agree to that."

"Good." She reached out and touched his face. "I really think you're wonderful. Have I told you that?"

Harry sat there, trying to absorb her words. He hoped that she would never have cause to regret knowing him. He knew that he would never regret knowing her even if he could never see her again after tonight. At that point, Cassie leaned over and picked up the box of popcorn and offered it to him. Harry tried some and was very surprised at how good it was. They sat there for a few minutes, munching on the popcorn and just enjoying watching the people coming in to the theater.

"Tell me about your friends, Harry. You do have friends, don't you?"

"I have two of the very best friends in the world." Harry answered her truthfully. "I have a lot of other people who I like and who like me but there are two who I just . . ." He stopped. He missed them so much. It was hard to talk about them without choking up and that would make him sound like a total prat. He continued, swallowing hard. "Ron. He is very funny and tries to do anything he can to get out of schoolwork. He has five older brothers and one younger sister. He . . . Well. He's Ron." He didn't know what else he could say. "And then there's Hermione, the smartest girl by far in our year." He felt rather than heard her indrawn breath. He smiled. "Ron and Hermione are in love with each other. They just won't admit it to themselves. We are all just waiting for them to see the obvious." He chuckled in a low voice. It was true those two had dated a little but they constantly seemed to be at each other's throats, and every week someone else in the common room was making a betting pool as to when they would finally stop arguing and start kissing. So far, Harry was refusing to put in any bets. It felt too disloyal.

"Tell me about Her . . . Hermi . . ." She stumbled over the name, like almost everyone did when they first heard it.

"Her- my-own- knee. Well, she has a motto and that is, 'When in doubt, go to the library.' She always does her homework weeks ahead of time and likes to nag Ron and me into studying for our tests. I don't know if we would have passed last year if it weren't . . ." Again, Harry broke off. This year, he wouldn't be there for end-of-term exams. He could picture both Ron and Hermione studying for the exams without him, crying like Sir Lionel had said. He hoped they both passed their tests. If they didn't, it was possible that Hermione would kill him, this time for real.

"Tell me about Ron, then." Harry thought for a few moments before he answered. It was a little hard to sum his friendship with Ron up in just a few words. He could go on for hours about their various adventures. After all, it had been Ron who had gone into the Forbidden Forest with him, all those years ago, Ron who had stood on a broken leg in the Shrieking Shack and told Sirius that he would have to kill him before he could kill Harry, Ron who had sat by his hospital bed after Cedric, Ron who . . . Well, it had always been Ron, hadn't it?

"I guess the thing with Ron is . . . . Well, I guess Ron. . . . I think that the funny thing about Ron is that he has and is everything I have ever wanted to have or be. And he looks at me and wishes that he could trade it all in for what I've got. We would both give anything to be the other. It's kind of strange, but somehow, . . . I don't know. It's like somehow we work together and we're better than either of us is separate. Does that sound too melodramatic?"

Cassie shook her head. "I think that sounds wonderful." She, too, was silent for a minute. "Do you have a girlfriend at your school?" Her question was quiet, hesitant, like she almost did not want to hear the answer.

"No. I mean, I've dated a little. Some different girls." Harry was not surprised the face that immediately came to his mind was that of Ron's little sister, Ginny. "There is one girl, Ron's little sister. Ginny is her name. She's liked me forever, since she was 10 and I was 11. But then about two years ago, I think she gave up on me. When I finally realized that I would like to try to see if our relationship could go anywhere, she wasn't available anymore. She's dating other boys

pretty seriously now and I don't know if . . . . Well. Some people think we are destined to be together. I don't know if I believe in that, though." Harry suddenly realized that he was doing all the talking, and probably not being very sensitive to the fact that he was here, on a date, with this beautiful girl, talking about someone else. He wanted to kick himself. "Oh, Cassie. I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right. I didn't think that knowing me for a week or two would really change your life. You are going back to school far, far away from here and me, and you will just pick up your life again." Harry looked at her. She really was such an amazing girl.

"Tell me about all the boys that you have dated. You must have a boyfriend." Harry teased her gently, trying to change the subject from this rather awkward line of questioning.

"Well, I have dated a little bit, but most of the guys in my school are such creeps. I don't really like any of them in particular." They chatted for a few more minutes about some of her friends and then finally, the curtains opened and the music started.

Harry took a deep breath. He had no idea what to expect. He hoped this was enjoyable. He really was taking a tremendous risk but when he was with her, it was hard to feel too threatened. The realities of Voldemort and his minions seemed vague and distant. His fingers tightened around hers as the previews of coming attractions started.



## Chapter 19

### Bond, James Bond

Within the first three minutes of the movie Harry knew he was going to love it. He sat on the edge of his seat as James Bond stole a Russian jet fighter with nuclear weapons and was able to fight his way out of the enemy's camp and fly to safety. He was blown away by the visual and special effects. As the opening credits played, Harry sat there holding Cassie's hand thinking about how he was going to get Ron to a movie theater to see James Bond.

As the credits ended and the new scene opened, Harry was drawn immediately into the story about the MIG fighters and the British ship. He groaned as the ship sunk and all the men got dumped into the water and then were machine-gunned by an evil-looking blond guy. Harry thought that his hair color was a perfect match for Malfoy's ice-cold blond hair. He thought to himself that if it wasn't for the fact that Cassie had beautiful sunny-yellow blond hair and did not seem to have a mean bone in her body, he would renounce the hair color as completely indicative of evil. He asked Cassie, as he was reaching for yet another handful of popcorn, to explain a little bit more about what the villain (he thought his name was Carver) was really up to. He could certainly understand her answer of "I think he's manipulating the news so that people will notice his new media empire." Harry, who had been the subject of many manipulated news stories, had an immediate hatred toward the villain. When that scene ended and a new one began, Harry stared open-mouthed at Bond in bed with a gorgeous blond woman who was barely concealed under a sheet. He turned to Cassie and whispered, "I can't believe they're showing this on screen. It's embarrassing!"

He heard Cassie give a soft chuckle. She turned and whispered, "The scene is almost over. They're not going to show any more than this." She paused and then said in a light-hearted way, "What kind of a school do you go to anyway? A monastery?"

Harry leaned toward her and said, "Well, close, although we do have girls there. But I've never seen any of them looking like that!"

Harry heard Cassie give a louder chuckle. He stared straight ahead at the screen thinking to himself, "I can't believe I just said that." He could feel the heat rising to his cheeks and was glad they were in a dark theater so Cassie couldn't see the shade of crimson his face was turning.

Cassie again turned and directly looked at Harry. Barely concealing the laughter rising in her throat, she said, "Well, I should hope not!" Harry was about to hide his eyes in his hands when that scene fortunately ended and he was able to enjoy the story once again. He liked M immediately. She reminded him a lot of Professor McGonagall, smart and sharp-tongued, fighting incompetence wherever she found it.

Harry absolutely loved the main character, Bond. He thought that his cool actions under fire were very impressive. He also loved the fight scenes. He had been in his share of fights where he was completely outnumbered and should have died. He liked the way that Bond was able to throw his entire self into the fight and use whatever weapons he could find at hand. Harry felt like if he were in Bond's position, he would act the same way he did. Harry glanced occasionally at Cassie. She seemed to be enjoying the movie as much as he was, covering her eyes in some of the scary parts, laughing out loud when it was funny, and holding her breath during the fight scenes. When there was yet another scene where Bond was kissing (and doing other things to) Carver's wife, Harry tried not to blush this time.

He had to admit that this movie thing was very pleasant. Sitting next to Cassie, holding her hand sometimes, eating popcorn and candy, even drinking through her straw when his drink ran out early in the movie (and she didn't mind at all), combined to make him think that taking a date to a movie was a good evening's entertainment. He was very glad she had suggested it.

He was very engrossed in the movie and realized one time that he had said more than he should have. At one point, the bad guys were trying to break into Bond's car which apparently had all sorts of weapon-repelling abilities. Harry, used to objects being charmed in order to do that sort of thing, noticed as the scene ended that he was muttering "Impervious, impervious," apparently trying to supplement

the charm Bond had put on the vehicle. He allowed his voice to fade to nothingness when he realized, hoping Cassie had not heard anything unusual. However, since she had a bit of a strange smile on her face as she handed him her drink once again at the end of that sequence, he thought he probably was not that lucky.

When Harry was watching the scene where Bond jumped out of a plane in order to scuba dive to the downed boat, he thought jealously of how it would be to be out there in the sky, flying. He missed his Firebolt and missed flying terribly. Cassie's thoughts apparently ran parallel to his because she leaned over to him and said "I would love to sky dive. I think flying through the air like that would be incredible." Fortunately, Harry caught himself before he said "Oh, it is! It is!"

Like everyone else in the theater, Harry was completely entranced by the long chase scene on the motorcycle through Ho Chi Minh City. Everyone ooh'd and aah'd as Bond and Mei Lin, the Chinese agent, were handcuffed together and escaped from the bad guys by riding a motorcycle through the streets. Harry thought he had never seen something that incredible on a motorbike. He knew Sirius had owned a flying motorcycle once and he decided right there and then that someday he would ride a bike like that. Harry listened carefully as Bond and Mei Lin discussed the villain's plans for the cruise missile. He thought he understood the general idea of what Carver wanted to do. It had something to do with causing trouble in one place, causing the British to assume that the Chinese had started that fight and then they would retaliate against the Chinese while he, Carver, just enjoyed the chaos. He thought that this probably would have worked (if it hadn't been for Bond, of course) although he did not really understand all the political stuff surrounding this. Muggle politics were not something he knew a lot about.

The final fight between Bond and the villain also really impressed Harry. He knew how it was to fight like that, to be just trying to stay alive when everything was blowing up around him. He watched it with mixed emotions, though. The exploding noises and fires exploding all around brought back too many reminders of so many battles he had fought. He tried to keep his mind on the fact that this was all make-believe but it was not easy. He also did not like the scene with the Chinese agent in the water, chained and drowning. It reminded him

too much of how Cho Chang had looked in the lake during the Tri-Wizard Tournament two years before. However, he pushed that depressing thought to the back of his mind as the closing credits started scrolling up the screen and Cassie stood up. Harry stood up, too, still in a bit of a daze from the excitement and emotional rush that he had experienced in the last couple of hours.

"Well, what did you think?" Cassie asked him, studying his face.

"I thought that was one of the most incredible things I've ever seen!" Harry answered truthfully.

"And that's not even one of the best Bond movies according to the critics, you know," Cassie said as they walked through the crowd toward the exit.

"You're kidding! You mean there are others out there like that?" Harry was truly surprised. But then, he thought, he really did not know much about movies.

"Yeah, I think that's like the 18th or 19th Bond movie."

"Amazing!" Harry thought that he would enjoy seeing all of them.

Cassie then asked what to her was probably a perfectly normal question. "Why don't you rent some on video to watch at home if you enjoyed it that much?" Maybe it was the completely blank look of confusion on Harry's face, but somehow she realized that renting a video was a totally new concept to him. "I swear, Harry. I do not understand what rock you have been living under for your entire life. Maybe someday I will."

Harry shrugged, smiling as they exited the theater into the cool darkness. "Maybe someday I can tell you. But not tonight."

## Chapter 20

### Home again

Cassie and Harry walked along with the crowd, heading generally toward the Underground. They were dissecting the movie, discussing favorite parts and funny lines. Harry told Cassie, "That was so fun. I'm glad that we came together to see this."

"I'm serious about renting some other Bond films, Harry. You seemed to really enjoy this one."

"I did really enjoy the movie but I don't really understand about renting the videos of the others. Could you explain that a little bit more?" Harry had decided that it was not worth trying to fake knowing more about this than he did; she didn't seem to mind if he was a little behind the times.

"Just tell me, please, that you know what a VCR is!" Cassie was laughing.

"Yeah. I know what one is." Dudley had gotten one for the last birthday Harry had spent with him - the infamous day of the zoo and the snake and the disappearing glass. "My aunt had one - but she only used it for taping television programs that she missed." This was a fairly minor lie. It had always been Dudley who was addicted to television programs.

"Well, that is one reason to have one. But you can also sign up at a rental place and rent videos of movies and shows and stuff. They usually don't cost much and then you keep them for a day or two, watch them at home, and take them back."

"So, kind of like a library except not."

"Well, yeah." Cassie noticeably slowed her steps as they got closer to the Underground station. Harry looked over at her concerned.

"Is something wrong?" He hoped that his ignorance on this one aspect of Muggle life had not convinced her finally that he wasn't

worth the effort. Maybe she felt like he really was an alien. He also automatically started scanning the people around them. Were they stopping, too? No. Everyone else looked happy and unconcerned.

"No. Are we in any hurry to get back to my house?"

"I'm not." Harry realized as soon as the words were out of his mouth that actually he probably should be because it was almost 11 and he had been away from his house for almost six hours. By the time he got Cassie home and walked the rest of the way back to his house, it would probably be after midnight. He hated to imagine the fit his doorbell would be throwing when he finally showed up. But then, he looked down at her and realized that he could handle anything the doorbell threw at him and he was willing to, just to spend some more time with Cassie.

"My curfew is 11:30 in the summer, so we don't need to go back quite yet. We could get the train that leaves here at 11:10 and be fine."

"All right." Harry was not quite sure what to make of this exchange. What was she suggesting? "What do you want to do for the next 20 minutes then?"

"Coffee?"

"Sounds good." They made their way into a nearby café and sat down at the crowded bar. Harry wanted to get a booth but that did not seem very likely, so he just double-checked that his hair was covering his scar and tried to relax.

"Anyway, Harry. I feel like it is my duty as a good friend of yours to make sure that you are suitably corrupted by movies with no depth and no good moral message." They ordered as the waitress noticed them, and Harry was pleasantly surprised at how good the coffee was. He hadn't had it for a while.

"You do, huh?"

"Yes. So I'm afraid that an evening full of old Bond movies is called for at this point."

"Oh, please! No! The torture! Are you sure this is necessary?"

"Absolutely. That way if you are an alien you can take the worst aspects of humanity back to your planet and convince them that we are not worth invading." She laughed quietly, sipping her coffee. Her blue eyes sparkled and Harry thought it was possible he could drown in them.

"Actually, I think it might convince them that your planet would be too hard to invade. They would realize that if everyone fought like that, they would have no chance to win!" They both laughed at that.

"Seriously, though, Harry. I'm busy tomorrow night but the night after that I think my parents wouldn't mind having you over to watch a couple of videos."

"Are you sure, Cassie? I don't want to impose."

"I'm allowed to have friends over without getting permission. If they're busy, we'll just watch them ourselves. I should warn you, though, that the boys would probably be watching with us. You saw how much Matthew loves James Bond."

"Well, that's okay. I will probably need to play at least one video game with John, anyway. I owe him." A very embarrassing thought crossed Harry's mind at that point. "I have to ask, though. Does every movie have a scene as, uh . . ." Harry stammered a little bit. "As, well, revealing as that one in tonight's . . ." His voice trailed off and he began to feel self-conscious about being so uncomfortable over the "love scenes." He wondered if he would have been as embarrassed if he had not been sitting next to a very pretty girl to whom he was very attracted. He tried to control the blush he could feel starting under his collar.

"Most do, but that's the beauty of a video, you can just fast forward through those parts."

"That's good." Harry couldn't imagine having Matthew sitting there next to him while they watched another scene as suggestive as the one in tonight's movie had been or Cassie's parents, for that matter.

"I want you to come with me and pick the movies. At the video place. That way, we can both decide and you can't blame me if you don't like it."

"I trust your judgment. I'm sure you can pick better than I can." She was insistent, though, that she wanted him to come with her, so it was arranged.

"Seven, then, at the grocery store? Right?" They had both finished their coffee and were heading back onto the street.

"Yeah. Sorry I can't invite you for dinner that night. Chances are my mum wouldn't mind having you, but I better not promise. Maybe I could call you, though, if she says it's okay?"

"Um, no. Sorry. I don't have a phone. I'll just grab something myself before I come. Maybe I'll even grab some more of those great fish and chips that evening. You don't have to worry about me."

"Okay. You don't have a phone?"

"No." Well, that was a lie and Harry felt bad as he had just this evening promised her that he wouldn't lie to her, but he felt a little justified as it would be hard to explain that he had a phone at the house but didn't know the phone number.

They arrived at the Underground station which was fairly empty. Harry thought this meant that they could probably get a seat on the return journey. Not that standing had not had its advantages earlier, though. When the train arrived and they got on, they were easily able to find seats. They talked for a few minutes about what snacks he wanted to have while they watched the movies, and then she fell silent.

"Is something wrong?" Harry reached up and tugged gently on her ponytail, loving the way her hair felt. He let his hand find the back of



her neck and he rubbed the nape of her neck gently, massaging the muscles there. .

"No. I'm just suddenly very tired." She yawned suddenly and flushed. "Sorry. It's not that you're boring."

"You mean that coffee hasn't kicked in yet, huh?"

"I guess not."

"Well, you can just relax. I don't mind if you're not keeping me entertained."

She leaned against him rather suddenly, arranging herself so that her head was against his shoulder and it seemed the most natural thing in the world for his arm to curve around her waist to hold her in place. She smiled faintly and Harry thought for one brief moment that he hoped the train broke down and they were stuck on these tracks for a very long time.

They were still sitting quietly together at the next stop when four teenage girls entered the train and sat on a bench behind them and to the right. Harry had only noticed them vaguely because they were a little loud and their clothes were definitely very suggestive. He thought it was possible that the blond girl in the movie tonight had been more covered than these four. It was not until a minute or two passed that he suddenly wished he was anywhere but here.

They were speaking in fairly low tones, now, but Harry was close enough that he heard every word. It surprised him that they were speaking so openly but realized that if he were a Muggle, he would have just thought they were nutters and ignored them.

"My mum had a fit when I told her we were going by train tonight. She really wanted me to floo there." "Hate that. You are always so dirty after. It's embarrassing." "Yeah, wish apparation was an option." "Not me. I like the trains. Drives mum batty." "Your mum's already a little batty." "Thanks. She was lecturing me just tonight. . . ." "Ooh, I can hear it coming." The girl spoke in a high voice, obviously imitating her mother but it was the words she spoke that sent cold water chills

through Harry. "With Potter gone, we are not safe anywhere. You don't know what it was like then . . . , blah, blah, blah." The girls all laughed but Harry knew they were talking about his "death." "He was so cute." "Like you ever met him." "Well, I didn't, of course, but I could sure drool at his picture. Pity I'll never have a chance to meet him now." "Don't you have some clipping from the Prophet hanging above your bed?" "Yeah, I talk to it every night but he just smiles vaguely at me. Wish I had one of him from a match. Then I could watch him fly forever." "Well, I for one will never forgive You-Know-Who for killing him. I had high hopes of becoming Mrs. Potter some day. . . ." "Yeah, fat chance that was going to happen." Harry had, without realizing it, slid further down into his chair with every word they spoke. There would be no question of them recognizing him if they saw his face. How many more stops before they could get off?

"Hey, you all right?" Cassie had sat up and was looking at him concernedly. He was scrunched pretty far down in his seat now. He straightened a little but before she could say anything else, he interrupted.

"Shh." Harry did not want her to draw attention to him. He turned a little more toward her so that it was less likely the girls could see his face and smiled, trying to not cause her too much concern. Fortunately, she didn't push the issue and leaned against him again, also squishing down in her seat a little so her head still rested against his shoulder. He could tell she was not as comfortable and he tried to adjust slightly without being too obvious.

They only had a few more minutes before they could get off, but for Harry it was a very long time. The girls' conversation continued. "My dad says that the Aurors are everywhere trying to hunt down the DE's but that they won't be able to hold You-Know-Who off for long now. I think he's really frightened." "We've still got Dumbledore, though." "Yeah, but since You-Know-Who killed Potter this time, he might be stronger than Dumbledore thought." "I think that grownups are way over-reacting. So what if You-Know-Who takes over the ministry? Like it's going to matter to me." "Ooh, I don't want that. He scares me." "My brother says that it could happen any day now. I guess Fudge is hardly even putting up a fight." "Well, your brother is a complete nutter. Of course Fudge is fighting. He's just a big git. He

can't seem to do anything right. That's why the DE's are winning." "So what was Potter really doing to help, anyway? I thought he was still in school?" "Of course he was. But he was still fighting for the ministry. They were hoping he could do whatever he did the first time again."

It was with relief that Harry heard their stop announced. The conversation behind him had scared him badly for two reasons. It was obvious they had seen his picture a lot (above her bed? Unbelievable!) and if they even thought he looked kind of like "Potter" they would all turn and stare at him and they would certainly recognize him. Second, it sounded like the ministry was on the verge of collapse and although Harry had no great love for Fudge, secretly agreeing with the girl who said Fudge was a big git, he certainly didn't want it to collapse completely. His hand went automatically to his wand, pushing his shirt up so that his fingers actually touched the wood. What he was planning on doing with it he did not know. He couldn't really disguise himself with it, couldn't kill the girls (even if he wanted to -- which he didn't), could possibly memory charm them but he was not well-skilled at this and with four of them it would be iffy. Cassie noticed his hand on his wand and sat up, turning to look around to see what he was nervous about. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Don't look around. I don't want anyone to notice me here." Her eyes got a little wider at this, but she turned toward the window as they approached the station, not saying anything.

As the train stopped, Harry stood up quickly, not daring to look back at the girls, who were still giggling and talking. He took Cassie's hand. She tried to go out of the door right by where they had been sitting, but he tugged her rather urgently toward a door further along the train. Cassie's eyebrows knitted together with a questioning look, but Harry just strode quickly to the door and exited with her right behind him. Once on the platform, he went immediately over to a train schedule, concentrating hard on it as the train picked up speed and left the station. Once it was gone, he turned to Cassie, who now was looking at him like he had seriously lost his marbles. He glanced quickly around the platform, making sure that the girls had also not exited here. No. There were only a few people down here and they all looked to be Muggles.

"Are you planning on getting back on the train?"

"What?" Harry had no idea what she was talking about.

"Why are you looking at the schedule?"

"Oh, uh, just . . ." She was looking at him fully now and Harry realized that he really did owe her an explanation. He had just three hours before promised her that he wouldn't lie to her. And since then, he had lied twice, once about the VCR and once about the phone. Now, she deserved to know.

"Cassie." He took a deep breath and they started to walk toward the exit from the station. "I thought someone on that train would recognize me."

"Recognize you? What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, know it was me. Those girls . . . well, they may have seen me before." This was more complicated than he had realized.

"And this is bad because . . . why? I thought you didn't know anyone here in town."

"I don't. They would have recognized me from seeing pictures of me."

"Pictures?"

"It's all very complicated. Anyway, I need to get you home." He felt a vague pounding in the back of his head. His scar wasn't hurting, but practically everywhere else was.

"Wait." He had been practically pulling her along in his anxiety and she planted her feet and refused to move. "Stop, Harry. I need to know what you are talking about."

"I can't explain. It's just too . . ."

"Complicated. I know, Harry. Your life is extremely complicated. And I couldn't possibly understand, I'm sure. But seriously." Her eyes

narrowed slightly at him. "Are you in trouble? Like wanted for a crime or something? It's not mug shots you thought they might have seen, is it?" Harry's first instinct was to laugh. Him in mug shots! But then he realized what she was actually asking.

"You think I might be a criminal? Like a crook?" He started walking, not taking her hand this time, toward her house. She followed a few steps behind, trying to keep up with his longer stride.

"Well?"

"I'm not a criminal, Cassie. How could you even think that?" He felt sick inside, like somehow her thinking that about him made it possible. His head was pounding now and he walked a little faster. He needed to get home.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" Her voice was tight now. "But what am I supposed to think? You're not making sense!"

"I know."

She ran a few steps to catch him and grabbed his arm. "You're frightened. You were terrified on the train. You think I didn't notice? Your heart was racing a mile a minute. I could hear it. You were scared. I was scared."

"I can protect you."

"I wasn't frightened for me! Don't you understand? I was frightened for you!" She was talking loudly, now, and Harry glanced around nervously at the dark houses nearby.

"I'm not a criminal." He tried to speak calmly although he really felt like hitting something. Not her, but if a Death Eater had been around, he would have very easily been able to summon enough anger to do a really great Cruciatus curse.

"Fine, then, you're not a criminal. Tell me what it was that frightened you." She stopped suddenly, like something had just dawned on her. "Oh. Oh. That all makes sense." She turned toward him again.

"You're hiding because someone is trying to hurt you. You're in that witness protection program thing, aren't you?"

"I . . ." Harry desperately wanted to say yes. Then she wouldn't think more bad things about him.

"I, well. It's kind of like that, although not exactly. It's a little bit complicated, Cassie. I know I keep saying that, but it's the truth. You're just going to have to be mad at me if you want because I -" They had arrived at her house, which still had lights on. It was 11:30 exactly, and Harry was relieved that he had not gotten her into trouble although she seemed in no hurry to go inside.

"I'm not mad at you, Harry." She was speaking softly now, standing very close to him. She reached out and put her hand on his arm again and he felt her warmth. "I trust you, Harry. I do. I'm sorry about saying you might be . . . Well, I just . . . I don't know." She was silent for a minute, and then she leaned against him in that way she had that completely endeared her to him. It always made him feel like she was trusting him completely and he liked that feeling. He slipped his arms around her, pulling her closer. She very quietly asked, "Are you still going to come over?"

"You mean for the movies?"

"Yeah."

"I want to Cassie, desperately." He didn't quite know how to say the next part. "It's possible I may have to leave before then. I don't know when I'll have to go away. Just know that if I ever go away without saying good-bye to you, it's not because I don't like you, okay. Do you understand that?" She lifted her head off his chest, nodding a little. Her face was very close to his and Harry thought that her mouth looked very soft. He bent his head a little, thinking that if he could just kiss her once, maybe he wouldn't mind so terribly much if he never saw her again. She moved a little also and Harry thought with sudden joy that she wanted to kiss him, too. Then the porch light flicked off and on, and she pulled back suddenly.

"Darn. They know I'm out here. Probably looking out the window at us. I better go in, Harry. I'm sorry about everything."

Harry thought he might die of embarrassment to think that her parents may have been looking out the window at them, but then at the same time had the thought that they could have at least given him two more seconds. He wanted to give some great good-bye speech in case it was the last time he saw her, but the only thing that came out was "It's okay. I'll see you soon." And then she was gone. And Harry, who should have been practically sprinting for the safety of his invisible prison, wanted to do nothing more than stand there on her curb and wait until she came out again. He forced his feet to turn toward home and walked with a determined gait back to the reality of his life.

## Chapter 21

### The Doorbell and the Dream

Of course, he thought to himself 30 minutes later as he stood outside on his porch, reality could mean different things to different people. He seriously doubted most people would consider his life anywhere near reality. And sometimes, he had to agree. He was in the middle of listening to his doorbell yell at him. Yes, that's right. Yell. At him. Apparently, he had been gone for much too long tonight. He had expected a lecture and probably would have been a little disappointed if the doorbell hadn't at least said something. Harry liked the pleasure of slamming the door hard behind him, cutting the doorbell off mid-rant. He had fully expected to do this again tonight.

However, his plans had not taken into consideration one fact. The doorbell controlled the door's opening. Harry did not have a key to the door. There was no lock on the outside, despite the fact that there were about six of them on the inside. The doorbell simply opened the door when someone gave it the password and it thought the person was trustworthy enough to be let in. Tonight, the doorbell had decided that Harry was not worthy of entrance until he had been warned in the strictest terms about staying home more often. Harry tried to endure this lecture with good grace. He really had been gone for a very long time. He listened, nodding at the appropriate places, and finally the door opened and Harry slipped inside, locking the door carefully behind him. He thought the doorbell had been a little disgruntled that he had not promised to do better in the future, but Harry had to admit that if he could live tonight over again, he would. And he would enjoy it just as much. Except, he amended, he would kiss her this time. Definitely. Maybe twice.

He looked over at the portrait of Sir Lionel. Still sleeping. He apparently had not missed anything too exciting while he was gone. He definitely did not regret going to dinner tonight or to the movie. He had not had that much fun in a very long time.

He undressed slowly, remembering every detail of the evening. Cassie had been so nice to be with. He thought about how she had laughed and joked and really liked being with him. He was so lucky to



know her. After he got into bed, he lay there, thinking about everything that had happened that evening. He was not sure how he was going to manage for two days without seeing her again. It was a long time before he finally fell asleep.

He and Ron and Hermione were laughing together as they entered the Great Hall. There was going to be a feast and Harry was starving. The house tables were full of students, all talking and laughing. The three of them sat down in their usual place, which put him next to Dean Thomas and Ron next to Neville. Hermione sat across the table next to Lavender Brown and Ginny. Everyone was busy relating how their day had gone. Quiet suddenly descended on the hall, and Harry looked expectantly up at the head table. Dumbledore stood up to make some announcement or another and announce the opening of the feast. But. But. It wasn't Dumbledore. It was Voldemort. He was tall, dressed in the black robes he preferred. His red eyes were bright. He started speaking. The words coming out of his mouth were horrible, terrible words. He chanted curses that Harry recognized and many that he did not. But no one else seemed to notice anything unusual. Everyone else was still staring raptly up at Dumbledore/Voldemort, entranced. Harry looked around frantically. Did no one else notice? No one? He glanced instinctively at Slytherin's table. Most of them had the same blank happy stare that everyone at the other house tables had. Malfoy, however, flanked by his two stooges, looked smug. Harry thought it was obvious that he knew something was going on. But everyone else was clapping and smiling. Well, almost everyone. He turned again to look up and down his own Gryffindor table and met one panicked gaze. One. It was Ginny. Yes, she would know, she would know. . . .

Harry woke up suddenly, drenched in sweat, eyes wide open in the darkness. That had been a very strange dream. Very strange indeed. He got up, grabbing his glasses off the bedside table. He flipped on the living room lamp again and had a definite sense of déjà vu as he pulled out that same scrap of parchment from a few nights ago which he had tucked under the other pieces on the desk. He grabbed the quill and scribbled down everything he could remember of the dream. The details were fading quickly, running out of his memory almost as quickly as he could write.

When he laid down again this time in his bed, he tried to blank out his mind like he knew he should rather than thinking about Cassie. He fell quickly back to sleep and the sense of absolute horror that had been present during the dream stayed at bay. Next thing he knew, it was morning.

Harry lay in bed for a minute, trying desperately to remember what had disturbed him in the night. Oh, yeah, the dream. He couldn't remember much about it, other than the fact that Voldemort was in it. He did remember writing it down in the night. He really was going to have to start sleeping with the parchment, quill, and ink next to his bed. Ugh! This reminded him a little too much of that awful Trelawney and her "dream diary." His thoughts wandered slightly. That year, his dreams had been terrible - more like nightmares really. Then of course, there was the -----

Voldemort!!! Harry sat straight up in bed, an awful thought materializing where there had not been one before. Voldemort couldn't have planted that dream in his head, could he? Could he somehow have found out about Harry, sensed something? There was a very real feeling of panic rising in Harry's throat, now. He tried desperately to remember the details of the dream but could not really catch any of them. He got up out of bed quickly, running to the living room to grab the parchment scrap only to have to run back into the bedroom to grab his glasses before he could actually read anything he had written. The notes were pretty sketchy. It had something to do with Voldemort, the Great Hall, and a feast. He did remember the panicked feeling from the dream, though, and the scared look on Ginny's face. If Ginny was scared, something bad must have been happening.

Harry took a deep shuddering breath, trying to get control of the emotions now running rampant through his mind. He had learned a lot about controlling himself this last school year, and he forced his mind into the familiar blandness that had almost become second nature during occlumency lessons. He looked at the picture of Sir Lionel, who looked like he had not moved for a century, and seriously contemplated sending him with a message. He debated for a minute and then decided that although he felt extremely stressed at the moment, he really was not in mortal peril. He quickly grabbed a clean

sheet of parchment and wrote a note to Dumbledore, describing the dream as best as he could from the scratches he had made last night and asking him if it was possible that Voldemort had found out about him. He felt safe in his little house, but he knew that he could not stay inside forever - even discounting seeing Cassie again, which Harry was not willing to do.

Harry's hand trembled as he finished the note. He had described the dream but had to ask the question that he really did not want an answer to. "Do you think there is any way that this dream could be another planted message from Voldemort? Do you think that somehow he knows I am still alive? Am I being used again?" He hoped that this last bit did not sound too pathetic. Before he could change his mind, Harry quickly stuffed the parchment into an envelope and stuck a stamp on it, scribbling the now familiar address of Dumbledore's friend onto the front.

He knew at that moment that staying inside permanently was really not going to work. He had to go outside right now to mail the dumb letter asking if he was safe to go outside. He hurriedly grabbed some clothes, threw them on, and stuffed his feet into his trainers. He practically ran to the mailbox on the corner and threw in the note. He hoped he would get an answer back soon. He breathed a little easier once he had redone all the locks on his front door without being accosted. He cursed a little under his breath. He hated feeling this way. He shoved his hand through his hair, still sticking straight up from his rough sleep. He needed a very long hot shower, he needed to eat, and he needed. . . . Harry was not really sure what he needed.

He ate first, throwing some toast into the toaster and scrambling some eggs. He considered cooking some bacon but decided against it. By the time he ate his last bite of toast and marmalade, he felt a little better and was realizing that he had probably over-reacted a little to a very stupid dream. He wished that somehow he could call the letter to Dumbledore back and edit out the questions at the end. But, since that was not possible, he would just have to be embarrassed over sounding so pitiful. Maybe Dumbledore wouldn't notice.

After the long shower that he had promised himself, Harry tried to decide what he wanted to do that day. He wanted to see Cassie, but

he knew that wasn't possible. He cast around for another idea. He was going to have to do laundry fairly soon, but it could probably wait until tomorrow. Maybe by then, he would have heard from Dumbledore. He had plenty of food in the house and (he had to admit) even if he hadn't had much, he would not have gone shopping again. He was feeling very edgy this morning and knew he would not be comfortable out in public. So, lacking any definite plan, Harry reverted to how he had been when he had first arrived. He paced around a little, watched a little television, played solitaire several times, and read some more out of the novels he had bought on one of his first shopping trips. He even contemplated baking something sweet but decided against it. He also managed to nap a little bit, although this surprised him. The day dragged by, lunch seemingly 15 hours after breakfast and dinner seeming like it might as well be a week away rather than six hours after lunch.

Harry kept looking at Sir Lionel, expecting him to leave, but he stubbornly refused to leave the portrait. Harry knew that no information would be coming from Dumbledore until the old knight left the portrait when Dumbledore called him into service. Of course, as is usual in these sort of situations, he left when Harry had given up looking the portrait at all and had instead decided to do a really thorough cleaning of the refrigerator. It was when Harry was busily scrubbing out one of the vegetable bins that he heard Sir Lionel calling to him.

Finally!

"Well, Sir Lionel, what is going on?" Harry wiped his hands dry on a rag and moved over to stand in front of the portrait.

"A message from Albus Dumbledore." The knight cleared his throat. "Harry, I am sorry that you are so concerned. I agree that the dream you had last night was very interesting, but I can assure you, it is not from Voldemort. He is convinced that you are dead. Of that, I am positive. Things are moving as I expected they would and moving at about the speed I expected. But the time is not yet right for your return. You will know when that time has come. I can only tell you this now, Harry. Dreams can sometimes be powerful messengers for those willing to listen. You must trust your instincts. Trust your

instincts." As he finished, Sir Lionel sat down on the small stool that was the only thing sharing his portrait. "That's all Dumbledore said."

"Oh." Harry was not quite sure what to make of this. He didn't understand everything that Dumbledore had said. He did understand that his headmaster was happy with the way the fighting was going and he also did not think Voldemort was planting dreams in Harry's head. That was a relief. He spoke carefully, giving a message to the old knight to take back to Dumbledore. "Well, tell him thank you and I will wait patiently as I have been." The knight gave him a rather disapproving look. "You, Harry Potter, have not been patient. You have been anything but patient." Harry flushed a little. "I'll try to wait more patiently, then." That seemed to appease Lionel and he disappeared again, and Harry sat down on the nearby couch and thought over what he had been told. He supposed this meant he could relax, at least a little bit. He felt a smile spread over his face. He would be seeing Cassie tomorrow night after all.

## Chapter 22

### Memories: Modified and Un

Harry sat for quite a while, thinking about Dumbledore's message and wondering what he had meant by some things. He knew that Dumbledore tended to speak rather symbolically sometimes but Harry usually at least understood what he meant. This time, though, the whole part about the dreams being messengers confused him a little bit. It wasn't that he did not understand the words, it just surprised him maybe more than confused him. He had understood, no he had been told by Dumbledore himself, that the headmaster did not believe in Divination. Yet, he was basically telling Harry that he should trust Trelawney's sort of magic. Well, okay, maybe that was reading more into the message than had been intended. Harry shook his head and stood up suddenly. He was quite hungry and as it was coming on toward dinner, he needed to do something about it.

He stared for a while at the contents of the refrigerator. He had the time tonight, maybe he would make something a little more difficult than just a sandwich. He grabbed a package of steak and then some salad. Yeah, that sounded really tasty. About one-half hour later, he was practically drooling as the steak finished cooking. It smelled fantastic. He had also hurriedly sliced some potatoes and thought they looked really good in the oven as well. He scooped everything onto a plate and grabbed a knife and fork out of the drawer. He glanced up at the clock above the table and drew a quick breath. He would have to eat in front of the television again. The nightly news was about to start.

Harry chewed happily as the opening music for the nightly news broadcast started a few minutes later. The first few stories were pretty routine - bank robberies, car chases, etc. It was not until the fourth story, right after the first set of commercials, that Harry's attention really shifted from his food to the screen.

"So fill us in about the case of the disappearing witnesses, Jane," said the anchorman, a smiling dark-haired man who Harry thought tried to be funny although he usually failed.

"Right, Stone. Over 20 people called into the London Police main office this afternoon, complaining of a series of loud explosions that sounded like they were right outside their windows. The police dispatched a team to investigate immediately and this reporter was not far behind them. However, by the time the police arrived, the ear-witnesses so to speak (oh, Harry thought, spare us the puns) refused to cooperate."

"What do you mean, Jane?"

"Well, let me give you an example. Excuse me Mr. Johnson, (the mike was shoved into the face of an elderly looking gentleman), you gave your name to the police when you called reporting a loud series of explosions out in the street. Could you tell us about these explosions, when they happened, and what you think they were?" It was the blank and rather confused look that drew Harry's interest. He had seen that look before, too many times.

"I didn't hear any explosions. No, I'm quite sure that there were no explosions. And I didn't call the police. Why would I do such a thing?" The man drifted away from the mike and the reporter, shaking his head in apparent confusion.

"Stone, this has been repeated with all 23 of the original callers. And there are no other witnesses in the neighborhood who seem willing to talk either. So, with nothing more to work with, the police have reluctantly had to abandon any sort of investigation." The camera then drew back to show rather shabby looking offices and a run-down pub lined along a dingy street with a few people with rather vague unconcerned looks on their faces milling about.

Harry knew that look. They had all been memory-charmed. Every one of them. They had the dreamy look of confusion that he had first seen on Lockhart's face in the Chamber of Secrets all those years ago. Then later, the owner of a campsite and his family had wished Harry and the Weasleys a Merry Christmas as they headed home after the Quidditch World Cup in August before his fourth year. Harry had since seen that same look of mild confusion on many faces, mostly Muggle, although the occasional wizard had had it done to them. There was no mistaking it. Once again, the Ministry of Magic had

interfered to make sure that no hints of "strange goings-on" that could not be explained made it out into the general Muggle population.

He then came to the next obvious question. What were they covering up? What had the explosions been? Harry thought that the street they had shown looked vaguely familiar, but he could not place it. He tried to remember, but it was like trying to grasp smoke. The more he struggled to get a grip on the memory, the more it eluded him. He decided, however, that he would remember if he calmed his mind and allowed the thoughts to surface when they were ready. He decided that he would relax. There was not much he could do about it anyway. If the Ministry had been there, then things were under control. (He laughed softly. Yeah right!)

He went to bed early that night, mainly because he was tired from his late night the previous evening, but also because there was nothing on television to command his interest, and he found himself thinking more and more about Cassie and how he was going to see her the next day. It was somehow easier to think of her in the quiet, and so turned off the television and climbed into bed. He would definitely kiss her tomorrow. Definitely. After all, he told the butterflies in his stomach, he had not been sorted into Gryffindor for nothing.

It was nighttime. He and Ron were crouched in the corner under the invisibility cloak. Ron looked so very young. Harry supposed that if he could see himself, he would look the same. He recognized the surroundings as Hagrid's hut even though it was seen through the haziness of the cloak. Hagrid was looking terrified and Lucius Malfoy was standing too close to them for comfort. Dumbledore was talking to Fudge. "However, you will find that I will have only truly left this school when none here are loyal to me." It was suddenly two years later and the worry Harry had felt at that moment in Hagrid's hut was replaced by a suddenly multiplied agony that even now, two years later, caused his heart to almost stop completely in protest. "Every guest in this Hall will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. . . .Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort."



Harry sat upright in bed, breathing hard. He hadn't thought about those horrible events of the third task for a while now. He didn't know what had made him think about those two events tonight. He did not really think that they had anything to do with each other and they seemed to have nothing to do with what he had been thinking about before he went to sleep. He lay back in bed, staring unseeingly at the ceiling and quietly drifted back to sleep.

He remembered that night so well, but no wonder. He always laughed about this to himself. He had lived it twice. Sirius. Dumbledore giving him and Hermione the way to save his godfather. He remembered seeing Sirius for the first time in that Shrieking Shack, remembered the hatred he felt toward him - hatred that had in the course of one evening changed to a friendship. And, yes, he had come to love him. No Dumbledore had not been able to save Sirius that first night, but he had told them how. Harry remembered thinking that Dumbledore knew how to fix anything. Harry also remembered the first time he had ever heard his name, well, at least that he could remember. It had been that horrible night out in the hut on the rock when Vernon and Petunia and Dudley were running from his letters and then Hagrid had come, Hagrid who had rescued him from the Dursleys and changed his life. Hagrid had defended Dumbledore to Uncle Vernon who had called him a "crackpot old fool." But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head. "NEVER - INSULT-ALBUS - DUMBLEDORE - IN - FRONT - OF - ME!" Harry remembered that he had his turn later to defend Dumbledore, also. . . . No, that couldn't be, could it? Ginny. Oh, Ginny. She looked so fragile, so pale, laying there on the stone floor. "Don't be dead, please don't be dead!" Tom Riddle stood there, his face twisted and contorted with anger. And Harry was yelling: Sorry too disappoint you and all that but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you!!!! Tom Riddle was suddenly yelling very loudly "Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!"

Harry woke for the second time that night, and found himself tangled in the sheets, fighting to reach his wand to protect himself against

Voldemort. He had not thought about the Chamber of Secrets for a very long time. He smiled vaguely into the darkness. Ginny had been so young then, so awkward in her hero worship of him. She had grown a great deal in the past four years. He felt tears forming in the corners of his eyes and he blinked rapidly. He missed them all so much. He missed school. He loved Hogwarts. Oh, yes, he had gone through torture there, that was certain, but it had also been the source of some of his greatest joys. He closed his eyes again, remembering the moments before the first task in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He had thought then that he would rather be at Hogwarts facing dragons than back with the Dursleys. He still felt that way.

Harry saw in his mind's eye that time he had been in Dumbledore's office when Fudge was trying to arrest the headmaster. "Well- it's just that you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to -- what is the phrase? - come quietly." Harry was at the Ministry that horrible night. The fight had been going on for what felt like forever. Harry had been so certain that his death was eminent, and he didn't really mind. It would have been a release. "It was foolish of you to come here tonight, Tom." Dumbledore had rescued him, again, at a time Harry was not sure he wanted to be rescued. Then, Harry was standing in the ruined entry hall of the Ministry, being sent back to school via an unauthorized portkey that Dumbledore made of the wizard's head. "After that, I will need to return to my school." Harry had been too devastated to care that Dumbledore was coming back to Hogwarts. He felt again those feelings as he had thought earlier that year that he would be expelled from Hogwarts for good. He and Mr. Weasley had gone to the Ministry for Harry's hearing. Harry remembered . . . .

Harry woke for the third time. He saw again in his mind when he Mr. Weasley had been walking toward the phone box . . . .And suddenly, Harry's panic flared in a sudden rush that made him nauseated.

That street, that street from the news the night before. Harry had been there. Often. It was a street that no one would ever suspect of leading to one of the main entrances to the Ministry of Magic. Oh! No wonder they had been so efficient at hushing up any explosions in that area. The Muggles were practically standing on top of the

Ministry offices. What had been going on there? The ministry? Was it under attack? Certainly they would have protection, wouldn't they? Harry remembered that he had never had any difficulty getting into the Ministry, none at all. He remembered the phone box and thought that it was likely Voldemort could walk right into it, dial the number and tell the woman's voice that he was there to take over. The badge would come out and Harry could see it now: Lord Voldemort, Taking Over.

Harry got up, glancing through squinting eyes at the clock by his bed. No good. He grabbed his glasses. It was a little after 6 a.m. He just had to talk to Dumbledore. There was no other choice. He walked quickly out to the living room where Sir Lionel was sleeping in his frame. "Sir Lionel." The knight moved not at all. "Sir Lionel." Harry spoke a little louder. "Sir Lionel!" This time, the old knight jumped, falling off his low stool onto the floor in a loud crash of armor.

"What is it? What is it?" He was distinctly aggravated at being woken up, although Harry who watched him sleep all day every day could not understand why he was so angry. "You'd think he be grateful to have something to do" Harry muttered under his breath.

"I need you to take a message to Dumbledore. It's urgent." Harry tried to keep the panic under control, but his heart was beating very fast and the breathless quality to his voice betrayed his rapid breathing.

"Oh, Harry. I really shouldn't. Write him a note, as always."

"No, I need to tell him what I found out. I need him to make sure that the Ministry is secure. You need to tell him that Voldemort is trying to get into the Ministry, blowing things up and stuff. Maybe he doesn't know."

"I do not see that this is a matter of . . ."

"Look, Sir Lionel. I want you to go tell Dumbledore -"

Harry was going to continue explaining but suddenly Lionel was gone and Harry felt the nervous twistings of his insides increase. He hadn't even been able to get the whole message to Dumbledore, despite

taking a huge risk with sending the portrait to begin with. Now Dumbledore would think he was over-reacting two days in a row. Great. Harry had a slight ache in his scar and he rubbed it absently. The dreams he had last night were not like the other two he could remember since he got here. These dreams were all things that he remembered. He had actually been there as everything in those dreams had happened. He relaxed a little. The memories were distinct and clear. They were not, could not possibly be, projected to him to trap him or confuse him. They were just memories. He was obviously more homesick than he realized.

It was only 15 minutes later that Sir Lionel returned with a response from Dumbledore.

"Harry. It is good to hear from you. I can understand your concern about the Ministry. It is true that some of Voldemort's followers have been concentrating their efforts there in London. It certainly appears that they are going to try to stage a violent attack against the Ministry in the very near future. Indeed, it is possible they may have gotten in last night were it not for two Aurors who happened to turn up at a convenient moment. Things are going the way I had hoped they would, Harry. It will not be very long now. I expect that I will be able to send for you in about two weeks or so. Please, do not worry yourself over the state of the Ministry. You keep doing exactly what you have been doing and I look forward to seeing you again in person, Harry."

Then, Sir Lionel said, "Really. I hope you thought that was worth it." He shot Harry a rather sharp sideways glance and promptly settled back down on his stool to sleep.

Harry, it was true, had not learned much about what had happened at the Ministry although he supposed that if Dumbledore hadn't said, it couldn't have been too important. He was glad to have a new time frame to work with, though. Two weeks was not unreasonable. He could live for two more weeks. And, he was especially pleased that Dumbledore told him to keep doing what he had been doing. A picture sprang to his mind of a very pretty face with blond hair and bright blue eyes, and Harry glancing at the clock realized he had a little more than 12 hours before he would be seeing her again. "Just

following orders," he said to himself with a slight smile. "Must do my part for the War effort."

## Chapter 23

### Fun and Games

After the wild adrenaline rush of the early morning, Harry sat quietly on the couch in the cool morning light, his heart beat and breathing slowing as he absorbed Dumbledore's calm words. He would stay in again today. There was a very slight risk that the small spell he had used to send Sir Lionel would mean that he would be discovered.

However, if someone hadn't found him by tonight, they weren't going to find him. He would just wait to see if anything happened. Dumbledore had not been worried at all and that fact went a great distance in helping Harry feel better.

By 5:00 that afternoon, Harry had given up any pretense of trying to remain calm. He only had two more hours before he could see Cassie again but could think of absolutely nothing to do until he could leave the house. He had done everything he could do and was bored beyond belief. He had cleaned the house thoroughly and gotten laundry ready to do the next day as he was wearing his very last set of clean clothes. He had eaten a rather large breakfast and lunch as he had lots of time to cook. He had watched a few shows on television and had watched the early news which had just ended, mainly so he could keep up a conversation tonight with Cassie's parents if necessary. He had decided at some point today that it was not really his job to keep track of the Ministry of Magic. He could focus on other things. And one of those things he wanted to focus on was Cassie.

He started pacing around, feeling like a caged tiger in a zoo. He was really looking forward to tonight. He was not exactly sure how everything was going to play out this evening, but he knew that he would be with Cassie.

By 5:30, he had decided it was time to leave. He combed his hair as carefully as he could, despairing at the persistent cow lick that made the back stand up. He grabbed his usual stuff he had to take with him: his wand, tucked securely into the front of his jeans, the address of the house, and his wallet. He contemplated for a minute how much

money he had spent and how much he had left. He had barely touched the large amount of money Dumbledore had left him and if he was only going to be here another two weeks, he really could go wild with what was left if he wanted to. Not that he wanted to. He did, however, decide that he would splurge and get another outfit or two. Even just a different shirt or something so that he was a little more dressed up than when he was just wearing a T-shirt.

He decided that he was going to pick something up for dinner tonight rather than cooking at home. He planned on going back to the fish and chips shop where he and Cassie had stopped that afternoon and headed in that direction. He was supposed to meet her right in that area, anyway. However, part way there, he noticed a little shop selling sausage rolls, a very greasy but tasty meal. He bought three of them along with a bag of crisps and a drink, sitting outside on a bench while he enjoyed the food. He thought Cassie would probably not be too pleased with his choice of dinners but he didn't let that bother him too much. She didn't realize how much energy he expended on a daily basis when he was living his normal day-to-day life. In fact, Hermione was usually nagging him that he needed to eat more. Usually in the summer, he basically lived on a bare subsistence ration of food as Petunia and Vernon resented the fact he stayed so thin when Dudley was so huge. Harry did not really know what was going to happen this year. He did know, however, that he was not expected to have to go to the Dursleys. He was sure that they would be just as broken-hearted about that as he was. Of course, at this point, they thought he was dead. He wondered briefly if they had stopped celebrating yet.

He watched people as they walked by on the street, not meeting anyone's eyes and keeping very close track of what his hair was doing in the light breeze. He did not see anyone unusual and no one paid any attention to him. He finished his food and threw away the napkins, heading again to the grocery store. He got there very early. It was only 6:30 according to his watch and he knew he would have to find something to do with himself for a few minutes. He found the rack of magazines and newspapers inside the store and contemplated buying a paper. He finally settled on one and purchased it. Then he went back outside and leaned against the wall as he read the headlines. The afternoon sun had warmed the cement

wall, and Harry felt very comfortable standing there waiting. He got absorbed in a funny article and so was surprised when Cassie was suddenly there, grabbing the paper out of his hands. "Hey! It's good to see you!" He looked up and caught his breath. She was absolutely beautiful. She hugged him quickly, kissing him on the cheek, and Harry held her close for a minute before she stepped back out of his arms.

She was wearing light blue today and it made her eyes, already so blue, stand out even more. Harry just stared at her for a few minutes until she actually blushed. "What's wrong? Don't you like it?" She reached her hand up and touched her hair, which Harry now noticed was done in some sort of braid thing.

"No, I love it. I'm just amazed at how fantastic you look."

"Stop it. You're embarrassing me." Her bright smile took any real censure out of her words. And Harry thought that if she really didn't want to be looked at she wouldn't have worn the outfit which consisted of long shorts ending just above her knee and a buttoned shirt which left her arms bare. The color made her skin look more tanned than it naturally was and everything about it made her look very touchable. And touching her was something he was certainly not going to fight.

"Sorry." He felt a creeping warmth on his face and looked down at his watch so he would have something to look at besides her. It was only 10 minutes to 7. "You're early."

"So were you. I thought I'd beat you here." Harry thought that her light blush had deepened just a little more.

"I came early. I couldn't wait at home anymore. Besides, I ate on the way here and it didn't take as long as I thought."

"What did you have?" Her eyes narrowed slightly and she glanced across the parking lot at the awning of the fish and chip shop as if expecting a sign to be standing there saying "Harry Evans ate here!" When such a sign failed to materialize, she turned back to look at him.



He laughed at her expression. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you. I'd hate for you to worry about me. Cassie, I . . ."

He was just about to tell her that she worried too much about his food when she said, "I'm sorry. I'm nagging you too much, aren't I? I don't care what you had for dinner! Honestly." She smiled at the expression of surprise on his face. "I wanted to get here early, hoping you might be here. I missed you so much."

Harry was surprised at the jump his heart rate gave at the completely open look on her face. She missed him. Maybe she liked him as much as he liked her. He hardly dared hope this could be true but she slipped her arms around his waist again and pressed her head against his shoulder and he thought he would have been perfectly happy to stand there all day.

A few moments later, she drew back again. "I guess we better go. We've got a lot to do before we can even go home." She headed toward the entrance of the grocery store and Harry followed. "I promised Mum we'd pick up a few things while we were here and I also thought we'd get some snacks for tonight. Is that okay?"

"Sure." Twenty minutes later they left the store and Harry was carrying a grocery bag with a few snacks for the evening as well as the things Mrs. Robinson had wanted them to get. Harry used his free hand to grab Cassie's hand as they walked in a different direction than they had ever gone before.

"On to the video place." She led him to a brightly lit storefront on a street nearby and they stepped into what felt to Harry like a different world. Televisions were all over the place, showing different previews for movies Harry had never heard of. The store was full of people although Harry didn't feel too panicked as he was fairly positive that no wizard would have set foot in this place. He checked his hair again out of habit and looked around with amazement. The colors of the various boxes on the multitude of shelves were bright and garish, almost overwhelming to him. There was music blasting through loudspeakers throughout the store, and Harry's eyes widened at the noise.

Cassie seemed to know where she was going, though, leading him to a shelf in the back of the store. "Well, they don't have all of them, of course, and some will be checked out. But I bet we can find at least one or two that appeal to you." Harry looked at the titles on the small boxes.

"How do I know what they're about? The titles don't really give much of a hint."

"Oh, Harry. You're so funny." She picked up a box and flipped it over.

"Ah, I see." Harry quickly read through the plot summary on the back of this first back and squinted a little at the small pictures. Then he flipped the box back over, studying the scene carefully. "I don't see James Bond here."

"Well, this is Roger Moore. He played Bond for ages." She went on to explain that Pierce Brosnan, the man who had done such a fantastic job (in Harry's opinion) in the movie he had seen the other night, had not played the role for long and that he was the latest in a line of leading men who had tackled the role of 007. Harry carefully read through several of the boxes while Cassie offered her opinion on the pros and cons of each. They finally settled on two and headed back to the front of the store to pay. She pulled out what looked like a credit card as they headed to the register.

"I'll pay, Cassie." She laughed.

"I was counting on it. This is our membership card. You know, like a library card. You have to have one of these to rent the movies."

"Oh." Harry felt a little stupid, but she didn't tease him or anything, just explained. Harry thought that she probably had accepted the limitations on his "real-life" experience and had just accepted them. They rented the movies quickly and Harry was pleasantly surprised at how cheap it was to get them.

"Now we have them for five days if we want them that long." She took the bag with the movies as he was still carrying the groceries and they walked toward her house. "Harry, I've noticed that you have

commented a few times that you don't have much to do at your house." Harry nodded. She spoke a little hesitantly. "Maybe you should consider buying a VCR for yourself. I mean, then you could watch movies when there was nothing else going on." Harry thought about that for a few minutes.

"Yeah. That's actually a really good idea, Cassie. Are they really expensive?" He had no idea how much one would cost.

"Not really. I mean, you don't exactly seem like you're counting every penny, if you don't mind my saying so." She named a price which Harry was actually pleasantly surprised at. Then he realized something.

"I wouldn't be able to rent movies, though. I don't have any identification or permanent home address or anything. I'm sure you need that sort of stuff . . ."

"My mum and dad already said you could use our account, if you wanted." She said this quickly, in an embarrassed rush and it pleased Harry that she had thought that far ahead for him. In the next 10 minutes, the two of them set up a date for the next day where she would go with him to pick out a machine and get him the first couple of videos - not James Bond this time. "There are so many great movies out there you would like, Harry. It'll really help you pass the time, if you feel like you have to be home a lot of the time." Harry realized that it was probably a stupid idea to buy something like that just two weeks before he left but he could afford it, and when he left, he would give it to her. Then, the money just wouldn't be wasted. He would make sure to pick one out that she liked.

They walked to her house under the warm light of the summer evening, and Harry felt inordinately happy at the way things were going. He was having a great time and he got the impression that she was enjoying the evening also. They arrived at her house fairly quickly, and both John and Matthew came out to meet them as they stepped up onto the porch. John came running and grabbed Harry around the legs. "You owe me a video game because you said you would last time and then you didn't and you didn't come home before I had to go to bed and I got out my favorite game and I hope you like

it." Harry laughed, disentangling the seven-year-old from his legs and walking into the house.

"John, it helps to breathe once in a while. I know I owe you a game." He squatted down and looked the little boy in the face. "I felt bad about last time. I should tell you, though, I really don't know how to play any video games. So you'll probably win."

Matthew spoke up after that comment. "Great. I was going to say I'd play the winner, but I want to play you, Harry. Especially if you're really bad."

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. "Well, then. You'll be very happy, I'm sure." Ten minutes later, Harry was sitting in front of the television, back against a chair, holding a little paddle thing that was supposed to allow him to play the game. Harry had no idea what he was doing, but he decided it probably didn't matter. John would be happy to win and Matthew would probably be ecstatic to beat an older boy. Apparently everyone in the family agreed that although Cassie was fairly decent at this game and she was older, beating a girl did not give anyone bragging rights. The first game against John went along fairly close to how Harry had imagined it although by the end he felt like he was getting the general idea. John won convincingly and ran off to brag to his parents as Matthew took over. Harry also lost the second game, although this time it was a lot closer in score and everyone agreed that Harry had improved dramatically. Harry thought that his snitch-hunting ability and very good hand-eye coordination allowed him to play as well as he was. But when Matthew willingly handed the paddle over to Cassie, Harry decided that he really wanted to win this round. She sat down next to Harry and stretched her legs out next to his. He caught his breath and smelled the perfume she wore. This was a very good idea, he thought.

"How about a little bet?" Harry said.

Cassie laughed. "I am going to beat you so badly, you'll wish you had stopped after playing John."

"We can see about that. What do you say to a bet?"

"What would we bet?" Cassie was breathing a little faster now, and Harry imagined that she thought he was going to suggest something physical. He was tempted.

"Hm. Biscuits."

"What?"

"You said you would make me chocolate biscuits someday. If I win, you make the biscuits for tomorrow. If you win, I have to buy you a package of the dessert of your choice."

"Well, I'll take you up on that bet. But, if I win, you need to make me biscuits."

"Okay." The terms were set, and the game began. Harry had a bit of a difficult time concentrating as she was sitting very close to him -- but he played hard. His three opponents agreed that he had improved dramatically, but Cassie's familiarity with the game served her well and toward the end, she pulled ahead. In desperation, when it was obvious to Harry that he had no chance of getting chocolate biscuits the next day, he threw the paddle over to Matthew so he could finish the game, and Harry started distracting Cassie by tickling her feet. She kept laughing and tried to kick away his hands. She managed to pull out a victory despite his persistence, and jumped to her feet, advancing on him with what he thought was supposed to be a menacing look although she actually was close to laughing and her eyes were sparkling. "So, Mr. Evans, you think you can tickle me with impunity? You don't know what you are in for now." Harry thought with a little thrill of anticipation that she was going to tickle him back and he thought that this might turn out to be a very pleasurable punishment. However, she did not suddenly pounce on him. Instead, she turned to her youngest brother and said, "John, I think Harry wants to wrestle." The little dynamo suddenly slammed into his chest and it took Harry about 15 minutes of laughingly wrestling with John and Matthew who joined in after a few minutes before he could extricate himself and throw himself down next to Cassie on the couch.

"All right. All right. You guys win and I guess I owe your sister here some biscuits."

Cassie didn't let the boys start wrestling with Harry again, which he was grateful for. They had a lot of energy and he felt worn out which was saying a lot, considering he could endure a two-hour Quidditch practice without problems. "We better get started, everyone, if we are going to try to get through both of these movies tonight," Cassie announced loudly and her family members gathered into the living room where she was putting in the first movie, "Goldeneye."

As had happened with the movie in the theater, Harry was drawn into the movie within the first few minutes and really enjoyed it. He decided though, about halfway through the movie, that he much preferred watching a video to seeing a movie in a theater. There were several reasons for this. First of all, he liked the fact that everyone could laugh and joke and make comments about what was happening without being shushed by anyone else. Second, he liked the fact that there were all sorts of (albeit healthy) snacks being passed around. But mostly, he liked the fact that he was sitting with his arm around Cassie and there was no hard arm rest in between them. Her fingers were linked though his and she was turned a little so that her back was pressed against his heart and when she moved, he could press his face against her hair. It was still in the braid and Harry found himself spending quite a bit of time studying it when he probably should have been watching the movie.

When "Goldeneye" ended, everybody in the family stood up. Harry thought this might be a sign that it was time for him to go home, and reluctantly stood up. He hadn't kissed her yet, really, and he wanted to very badly. However, after a few minutes he realized that his leaving did not seem to be on the agenda. Mr. Robinson explained that he had an early meeting and he was going to turn in. The boys were begging to stay up but their mother was insisting they get into pyjamas and brush their teeth before they got into bed. And no, they couldn't stay up to watch the other movie. Mrs. Robinson explained that she was going to be reading in the other room. Harry sat back down on the couch. He didn't want to go home yet and unless they told him that he had to leave now, he was going to stay. Cassie came back from the kitchen a few minutes later with a bowl of popcorn.

"Mom won't let the boys eat this stuff. They make such a huge mess with it. But she thought we would be all right." When she went back into the kitchen for drinks, Harry followed her. He had kind of hoped that the opportunity would present itself to kiss her but she was hurrying around getting ice and soda and he abandoned the idea for the moment.

Cassie started the next movie a few minutes later, one of the older ones, she said. Harry could definitely tell. The film quality in this movie was not as impressive as in the other two he had seen. However, it was still as action-packed as the others and he enjoyed the opening sequences. Even so, after a few minutes he began to pay more attention to the girl curled up against him on the couch than the movie on the TV screen.

Harry again noticed how beautifully Cassie's hair was braided. He touched her hair and enjoyed feeling it under his fingers. He could smell her shampoo and again was reminded of fresh sunshine. Harry's hand slowly slipped down the back of her head, feeling the neat plaits of the braid. As he did so, the back of his hand lightly brushed the back of her neck.

Cassie started a little and asked, "Is my hair coming out of its braid?"

"No," Harry answered a little self-consciously, "I just wondered how you did this. It looks really nice." He could almost see her smile widen and she snuggled a little more closely to him. Harry continued to trace the patterns in her hair and every so often brush the back of her neck.

After a little while, Cassie laughingly said, "Hey, you're going to pull my hair out of its braid."

"That wouldn't be so bad," Harry responded and gently tugged a little at her hair to emphasize his words. "I like it down, too."

Cassie moved and turned a little to look up at him. His hand was still in her hair and he spread his fingers so that he was holding the back of her head. She was smiling and her eyes were twinkling even more brightly than usual. Harry looked down at her and felt his stomach

jump. He knew the moment had come to kiss her. He leaned down to Cassie and at the same time pulled her toward him. He felt her breath on his face for just a second. Their lips met and Harry tasted salt from the popcorn she'd been eating. He pulled back quickly, unsure how she would like kissing him. Her eyes were closed but then snapped open. Incredibly, Cassie's eyes were sparkling even brighter. She smiled at Harry. "That was nice." He flushed a little and leaned down to her again. She didn't pull away and Harry's hand pressed her head closer to him.

The second kiss was longer and sweeter. The warmth Harry had tasted on Cassie's lips spread through his body and his heart beat faster. His other hand came up from his side and touched her cheek, stroking the soft skin there before tracing down to her jaw. He pulled back again. "Did you like that?" He was speaking softly, his lips only a breath away from hers. She started to nod and he narrowed the gap again, this time moving the hand from the back of her head to her shoulder and tilting her head a little to allow him better access to her mouth by pushing gently against her jaw. She responded this time by putting her arms up to his shoulders and grasped his T-shirt as he tried to move back again. This time, she followed him and after a second, he relented. They moved apart after a minute or two, and his rapid breathing matched hers. He closed his eyes against the intensity of her gaze and then opened them again as she leaned against him, saying, "Oh, Harry. That was really nice." He put his arms around her and pressed his cheek against the top of her head, feeling very warm and secure.

Before they realized it, the movie was ending and they both laughed about their having missed just about the whole film. Reluctantly Harry rose to leave, knowing it was after midnight and that he really needed to get back home. Cassie, too, got up and leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He kissed her gently on the forehead, not wanting to start kissing her lips again in case he couldn't stop. Harry loved the feel of her against him as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Cassie looked up into Harry's eyes and said a little breathlessly, "Thanks for coming and watching the videos." He just leaned down and kissed her again before moving toward the door. He turned and



smiled at her saying, "Tomorrow morning at 11:00 am, right?" Cassie smiled and nodded yes.

As Harry left the Robinson's house, he felt like he was flying. In fact, he decided he had found something as good as being on his Firebolt. All the way home he kept replaying in his mind the feelings and excitement of kissing her. What made him the happiest was that she had seemed to enjoy kissing him, too.

## Chapter 24

### Pizza and a Problem

Harry's stomach growled as he stepped up onto the Robinson's porch and he grimaced. He hadn't eaten breakfast this morning because he had been in a big hurry. He had awakened early and went directly to the Laundromat to do much-needed laundry. On the way there he had dropped his hurriedly scribbled letter into the post box. In fact, he had written and folded the short note so quickly he was afraid the ink had not properly dried and would smudge. He hoped that Dumbledore could read it, or at least figure out that Harry was still alive and well.

Harry stopped for a second before he rang the bell and swallowed hard. He had been thinking of nothing except this moment since last night as he had walked back to his house. He had played over and over in his mind how it had felt and how she had looked when they had kissed - the look of happiness in Cassie's eyes afterward. He had gone to sleep with the taste of her kiss on his lips.

But with the cold light of morning, he was not so sure he was remembering it right. He had enjoyed kissing her, that he knew for sure, but now he was wondering if she was still happy about being kissed or if she had reconsidered. And if she was still happy, would she expect him to greet her with a kiss on the lips, or on the cheek, or just a hug? He was still debating this issue in his mind when the door opened and he looked into Cassie's pretty face and sparkling eyes. She reached out and he instinctively took her into a hug. He decided that he definitely wanted to kiss her again and he bent forward to do just that.

It was then Harry noticed Mrs. Robinson standing in the background watching. The boys were staring at them, Matthew with a rather goofy smile on his face. Harry all of a sudden felt very self-conscious. He began to redden a little so he turned his head quickly and gave Cassie a quick peck on the cheek instead. She looked at him with an expression of surprise. Then she remembered they had an audience and she giggled a little, obviously also a little self-conscious.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked as she took his hand and led him into the house, where he was promptly set upon by her brothers, pestering him to come play with them.

"No, not quite." She didn't explain further and she disappeared into the back, presumably to her bedroom. Harry thought she looked fantastic as usual, but he didn't protest. He had been on enough dates to know criticizing or complementing a girl's appearance at a bad moment could cause a major trauma. She didn't reappear for quite a while, and Harry had time to lose badly to Matthew in the same video game they had played the night before even though John tried to help him as much as possible. When she finally did emerge, Harry did not comment that she looked the same as before. Again, experience had taught him the mistake that could be. She was wearing a nice pair of jeans that emphasized her slim figure as well as a light pink T-shirt with small white flowers scattered all over it. She grabbed a white woven bag, slipped it over her shoulder, and came over to him. "I'm ready."

"Great. Well, I guess we should go." Harry and Cassie had just reached the front door when her mum said "All right, you two. Have a fun time. And be good."

Once they were on the street, Harry turned to Cassie and asked, "What did your mum mean when she said to be good? I sounds like she was, um, well . . . thinking we wouldn't be."

Cassie blushed a little and said, "Well, she knows we were kissing last night and she just doesn't want us to get carried away."

Harry turned even redder than before and thought to himself that going to a boarding school had its advantages. Parents knowing exactly what you were doing on dates was not something he was used to having to deal with. He mumbled something to Cassie about, "She isn't mad at us, is she?" Cassie turned to him, laughing, and said, "Oh no, she isn't mad. She likes you. She knows I like you. She just wants us to be careful."

Harry took Cassie's hand and half turned around, wondering if Mrs. Robinson or the boys were looking out the window. They were not

and he sighed a little in relief. They walked for a few moments in silence. All of sudden Harry realized he didn't have the slightest idea where they were going. He stopped and Cassie looked at him in surprise.

"Do we have any idea where we are going to eat?" Harry asked. He was seriously thinking that he might pass out from starvation if he didn't eat in the next few minutes.

"There are several places to eat another block or so this direction. Besides, there's an electronics store near here where we can pick up the VCR."

"That's great," Harry said, and they continued in contented silence until Cassie asked, "Do you like pizza? They have a great pizza parlor here."

"Yeah, I do like pizza a lot. But I haven't had it for years. Sounds fantastic."

"Good, why don't we go there?" A few minutes later they were sitting at a cozy booth and, although Harry would have liked to be closer to Cassie, he contented himself with smiling at her over the table. "So, what do you want on it?" she asked as they both looked at the menu. Harry was not particularly fussy about any food, and right at this moment he just wanted something quickly.

"I don't care. Whatever you usually get." When the waitress arrived a few seconds later, Cassie ordered.

"We'll take a large vegetarian and I'll have iced . . ."

Harry cut her off mid-sentence. "Wait. Wait. What did you just order? Did you say vegetarian?"

"Yeah."

"I'm starving. I need something more substantial than vegetables."

"It's good pizza. You told me to get what I usually order." Cassie's voice was a little indignant.

"I didn't know that you could even get lettuce on pizza."

"There's no lettuce on it. That would be gross. There's good stuff on it, just not meat."

"I like sausage and pepperoni - you know, the usual pizza stuff." He turned to the waitress, who was standing patiently, looking faintly amused at their discussion. "Is it possible to get one pizza with half one set of toppings and half another?"

"Of course. Or you could just get two different . . ."

"Yeah, okay. Let's do that. She'll have a small vegetarian thing and I'll have a small, um, let's see." He quickly surveyed the list of available toppings. "I'll have pepperoni and sausage and olives and mushrooms and extra cheese, please."

"I'd also like iced tea, please." Cassie spoke from across the table.

"Make that two of those." Harry had a distinct recollection of once liking iced tea although it had been a while. He wondered why it wasn't offered more at Hogwarts. The waitress left and Harry smiled across the table at Cassie. "There. That solved that problem, huh?" Cassie rolled her eyes, laughing.

"Yeah. Sorry about not asking first before I ordered. I guess it will take a little while to convert you to more healthy eating." A moment later, the waitress saved Harry from having to respond to that by bringing their iced tea and Harry sipped it quietly for a second. "I haven't had iced tea for ages. This is really good."

Cassie looked at him with a strange sort of expression. "That is about the fourth thing that you like that you said you haven't had for a long time. You haven't had pizza for years, you said. You haven't had fish and chips for a very long time. You haven't had iced tea for ages and I think you even said it had been a long time since you had had

popcorn. Do you ever eat anything? What sort of food do they feed you at that school of yours anyway?"

Harry blinked owlishly across the table at her. He had said all those things, he remembered, but at Hogwarts he never felt deprived. Actually the opposite. He cleared his throat.

"Well, we eat a lot of food, it's just, um, well. . . . I guess you could say it's traditional English food."

"Is there something more traditional than fish and chips?"

"No. I mean . . . ." Harry tried hard to think about what they actually did eat at school. The tables were always full. "We have a lot of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, roast chicken, pork chops, lamb chops, shepherd's pie, steak and kidney pie, sausages, bacon, mashed potatoes, roast potatoes, fried potatoes - well, a lot of potatoes. We also have the usual vegetables and desserts. I've never been hungry there."

"Oh. It all sounds very heavy."

Harry laughed, more of a snort really, at that comment. "You sound like Fleur. Zeee foood, eet ees all so 'eavy." He imitated her French accent fairly well, he thought to himself. He was spared having to explain this further by the arrival of their pizzas. He was on his second piece by the time Cassie finished her first. She had not forgotten his off-hand comment, and Harry regretted saying it.

"Who's the French girl?"

"Uh, Fleur?"

"I think that's what you said her name was."

"She was from France. This was fourth year. She came and she constantly complained about, well, about everything, really. I don't think she liked our school much."

"Hmmm. Was she pretty?"

"Yeah. She was really pretty. She had silvery blonde hair . . ." Harry cut off. He somehow didn't think that was the desired response to the question. He quickly amended. "Of course, she was three years older than I was and she called me 'leetle boy.'"

This seemed to lessen the tension a little bit, and Cassie started into her second piece of pizza. Harry had to admit that hers really didn't look bad. It had stuff he recognized for the most part, although he noticed what he thought were artichoke hearts and spinach leaves on there and was glad he had insisted on a normal combination.

She asked another question to change the subject from the unknown French girl and Harry was relieved he did not have to explain more. Her next question, then, caught him off guard. "So, if they don't give you iced tea to drink, what do you normally have with meals? Soda?"

"No. Pumpkin juice." Oops. Double oops. Shouldn't have said that.

"Yuuuck!" exclaimed Cassie, "Pumpkin juice? That sounds horrible. I've never heard of pumpkin juice before."

Uh oh, thought Harry, how do I explain this one? "Well, uh, pumpkin juice is a real favorite at our school. I think it is, um, exclusive to it. You know, they invented it and it's kind of traditional and everything. It's actually fairly good, cold. . . ."

"Well, it just sounds foul as foul could be."

"I guess I can see your point." They ate happily in silence for a while after that, and Harry even finished Cassie's last piece of pizza when she declared she was full. It wasn't terrible, although Harry had a big long drink of iced tea afterwards to wash the taste out of his mouth.

They paid the bill and made their way to the electronics store. They admired all of the televisions, radios, stereos, computers, and numerous other electrical gadgets, some of which Harry had never heard of before. They all looked very sophisticated and interesting.

"Mr. Weasley would love this place," Harry mused out loud.

"Who's Mr. Weasley?" Cassie asked.

"Oh, that's my friend Ron's dad," Harry explained, kicking himself mentally because Weasley was such a different name and he tried not to mention stuff that could identify anyone specific in his life. He continued, "Mr. Weasley really likes electronic things." Harry smiled to himself about Mr. Weasley's plug and battery collections.

"What male doesn't?" Cassie said with a laugh. Harry didn't really care much about electronics but didn't want to disappoint her, so he said nothing in response. They made their way to the VCRs and Harry found a nice one that was not too much money. He had decided the day before that he would be giving it to Cassie when he left and actually being here picking it out made him remember how little time he really had left with her. He didn't know how he would get along without her when that time came. He already missed her.

"You're all of a sudden very quiet," Cassie said. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, not at all," Harry lied, pushing the unpleasant and unwanted thought out of his mind and refocusing on the pretty girl at his side helping him to buy a VCR. He should enjoy the time he had with her, however long it was.

"Good," Cassie said, sounding a little relieved. "You're sure that you still want to do this?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"I just don't want to you to feel that I bullied you into it."

"You, bully me? Don't worry. I've been bullied by a lot worse than you. I can stand up for myself."

"That's true, I guess. You seem really quiet but when you want to, you can definitely have your way - look at the pizza incident!" A few minutes later, they were standing in line at the counter and before



long, Harry had paid for and was the proud owner of his first piece of electronic gadgetry. Cassie had also grabbed a video of a cartoon as they were leaving the store so he could make sure the VCR worked once it got hooked up.

They left the store and stood on the sidewalk outside. Harry was not sure what they were going to do next. The VCR was heavy and he wasn't sure how he was going to carry it around with them the rest of the afternoon.

They stood there for a moment. Cassie asked, "Now, do you know how to set up a VCR?"

"Oh sure," Harry responded, "I know how to plug it in to the wall."

Well, that's fine. That's certainly an important first step." said Cassie, and Harry could have sworn that she was laughing behind the words. "But I meant do you know how to hook it up to the TV and make sure everything is attached properly?"

Harry had a puzzled look on his face and asked, "You mean it hooks up to the TV also? I never paid attention at my aunt's house, I guess." Harry had a few dark thoughts go through his mind about the Dursleys and Dudley's possessiveness with his VCR, TV, computer and other toys.

Cassie gave Harry a bemused look and said, "I guess I better come with you to your place and help you set up the VCR."

A lightning bolt of sheer panic struck Harry with those words. Cassie's going to his place was, of course, out of the question. How would he ever explain the Fidelius charm to her - that is if he could even get her into the house? No. There was absolutely no way she could come to his house.

"Oh, . . . no, thanks," Harry said a little too hastily, "I can figure out how to hook it up. I'm sure there are instructions with it. You really don't need to come over."

"Have you ever tried to read a manual like that? I swear they're written in some foreign language or something! Anyway, I told my mum I wouldn't be home until later this afternoon so we have plenty of time to go over to your place and I'll just hook it up for you. It won't take long. I set up ours at home so I know what I'm doing."

"No, you really can't come," Harry said. He remembered what they had just talked about in the store. He could stand up for himself if he really wanted to. Now, he really needed to.

Cassie had a puzzled and, perhaps a bit hurt, look on her face. She said a little hesitantly, "It really will be okay, Harry. I'll only hook up the VCR for you. We don't need to stay long."

"It's not that I don't want you there, Cassie. It's just . . . Well, it's just really complicated." Cassie bit her lip. "You promised that you wouldn't ask too many questions, Cassie."

"I'm not asking questions. I just want to see . . . I mean, I want to help you with this. If you've never done this, I promise you won't be able to do it yourself. Why won't you let me come over?"

Harry realized that he had hurt Cassie's feelings. That was the last thing he wanted to do. His mind was racing a hundred miles an hour as he thought over and over what to do and how to get out of this sticky situation. He could not think of anything that would not end up hurting or embarrassing Cassie. He tried again. "I really . . . Well, I . . . Look, Cassie you really cannot come over to my house. Maybe you can show me at your house and write down some instructions or something." Harry grabbed at that idea like a lifeline. That would certainly work.

"That won't do at all. Every television is different, Harry. What works on ours may not work at all on yours. I'm trying to understand what is going on at your house that I cannot see."

"Nothing's going on, Cassie, honestly. I'd love for you to come. It's just not possible." He tried to sound firm, putting an end to any debate. However, she would not give in and Harry realized that he had two choices. He didn't like either option. He tried the least

horrible. "I'll take it home tonight and if I can't get it to work, I'll call you and you can help me over the phone. I'll read the instructions and you can interpret them or tell me what to do or whatever."

That was a mistake. Her eyes flashed. "You said you don't even have a phone. And trust me when I tell you that is not going to work."

Harry realized that he only had one way now of not having her come to his house and that was simply to say no and walk away, leaving her there. The panic that was causing his stomach to do great somersaults told him that this might be the wiser choice. But he could not bring himself to do that. If he still wanted to see her, he was going to have to at least attempt to have her come to the house. If it didn't work and she never wanted to see him again, then he would be no worse off than if he left her there on the sidewalk. Fine, then. That was what was going to have to happen.

"Okay," said Harry, resigning himself to the inevitable. "We'll go to my house and you can set up the VCR for me."

## Chapter 25

### Charm Undone

The walk to Harry's house took about thirty minutes. During that time, Cassie talked about various things - most of which Harry could not remember the second after she said them. He kept going over in his mind what was going to happen when they arrived at his house and a feeling of panic was dominating his thoughts. He had no idea what to expect when they arrived.

There were several possibilities of what could happen and most of them were not good. It would be hard enough to think of a reason to have her read the parchment with the address and think about it without her thinking he was insane. But he could maybe handle that if he had some guarantee that she would be able to see the house and get inside. What would be infinitely worse is if he gave her the parchment, she read the address, thought about it, and the house did not appear for her. After all, it would be a little hard to just say something like, "Well, I guess my invisible house is not going to appear for you. Let's go back to your house." Or, an even worse option is that she could see the house but could not actually get into it due to other charms Harry was not aware of.. Also, he did not think that even if everything went perfectly he could really explain why a house suddenly appeared out of thin air, so having her watch the house materialize was not something that would probably be a good idea. He always found it interesting but doubted that she would agree. Harry was wishing desperately that he knew more about how the Fidelius charm worked. However, when Dumbledore was giving him instructions, Harry had not thought to ask how he could get a Muggle into the house. And at this point, it was a little late to figure it out. Harry could really not see a good ending to this little adventure. Almost certainly, something would go wrong and then he would have a very hard time explaining the situation without revealing everything - and that was a conversation that Harry really did not want to have.

The closer they got to his place, the tighter his stomach tied itself into knots until Harry honestly thought he was going to be sick. He was trying to breathe deeply and relax but it was not working very well. He had given up answering Cassie at all and she, in return, had fallen

silent as well. Finally, the rather tense silence was broken by Cassie who stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk and said, "Harry." He stopped and turned toward her, noting with surprise her pale face.

"What's wrong?" She looked very upset and he could have sworn that he saw tear marks on her cheeks.

"That's a silly question," she said softly. "Obviously, I really blew it, didn't I?"

"What?" Harry was not sure what was wrong, concentrating so hard on what was going to happen in the next five minutes that he was having a hard time shifting gears in the conversation.

"It's obvious that you're mad at me for forcing you to bring me here, and I did force you, didn't I? I should have just accepted your original answer instead of insisting and I . . ." Her voice trailed off miserably and her breath caught in a strangled sob. "Let's just forget it, okay? It's not too late to just forget the whole stupid idea. You're a smart guy and I'm . . ." Anything after that was muffled by Harry's shirt because he had folded her into his arms and pressed her face against his shoulder, feeling the wetness of her face through his T-shirt.

"Oh, Cassie, honey, don't cry." He felt conspicuous, standing here on the sidewalk, holding her in his arms, so he looked quickly around. There was a low wall not too much further down the street where they could sit and talk for a few minutes. Plus, it would give him a chance to set down the shopping bag and rest his arms for a bit. He led her quickly over to it, pleased that although she was still quiet, she was not sobbing any more. As soon as they were sitting there, his arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders, she finished her sentence, interspersing her words with quiet gasps as she tried to regain her composure. Harry thought for one brief second that she even cried prettily.

"You're a smart guy . . . and I was rude to assume that you couldn't . . . figure it out yourself , , , and I just wanted to see where you lived, . . .and I couldn't figure out why . . . and I just . . . well, I was rude and . . ." Again, she fell silent, turning her face into his already-wet T-shirt as he awkwardly patted her shoulder.

"It's all right. I'm not mad, honestly." Harry really was not mad at her, never had been. He had known that sometime this issue was going to come up. And truthfully, in some small corner of his brain the thought of her being in his house, alone with him, away from the eyes of strangers or the loving concern of her family, where he could just relax and enjoy her company was very tempting. If things were different and he could just take her right into the house, he would have loved the idea of spending time with her there. He considered his options now in light of her willingness to back away from the whole idea. He could easily agree with her and walk her back to her house where he could leave the VCR and they could do something else today. That would probably be the smart thing to do. So why, that same small corner of his brain wondered, was he still considering walking her the last few minutes to his house and seeing what happened. He knew it wasn't just the idea of getting the VCR hooked up. Sure, it sounded like something he could enjoy, but he could certainly live without it.

Harry took a deep breath, pulled away from her a little bit, and started talking, slowly, thinking about each word before he said it.

"Cassie, I need to talk to you about something. I would love to take you to my house, I really would. It's just that . . . Well, I'm not really sure you're going to be able to get into it." She knitted her eyebrows together in confusion at that statement. He continued. "You know how you said I had a lot of secrets?" She nodded. "Well, this is one of them. Will you, um, will you do as I ask you to . . . and not ask any questions about it?" She nodded again, her dark blue eyes meeting his green ones, and he felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude at the trust she had in him. He continued, "If. . . if you can't . . . Well, if things don't work out and we can't go in, . . . You can think I'm nutters, alright, but try not to hate me . . . ." His voice went up, making this a question, hope in his heart that she would somehow be able to accept him, even though she thought he was certifiably insane.

"Oh, Harry. I could never hate you. And as for thinking you're nutters, I already know that you are and I haven't minded so far, have I?" Her smile broke through and Harry felt his heart jump in his chest. She really was the most amazing girl he had ever known.

"Thanks a lot," he laughed and hugged her again, enjoying how she felt in his arms. He took another deep breath. "We're not far from the house now, okay? It's just down another block or two." He must be crazy, he thought as he helped her stand up and picked up the shopping bag again. If he weren't, they would be walking the other direction, away from the potential minefield of his charmed house. Two minutes later, he stopped with her on the corner where they needed to turn. The time had come to tell her. "Cassie?"

"Yes?"

"This is going to sound really strange. Do you trust me?"

"I trust you, Harry." Somehow those four words conveyed to him a depth of feeling that threatened to overwhelm him. She really did trust him. He hoped he was not making a serious mistake trying to do this.

"Okay, then. You need to read this piece of paper and then you need to think about what is on it." Harry dug the now very well-worn piece of parchment out of his back pocket, reading it quickly himself as he handed it to her. The charm was very thorough. He had found that he had to read the address every single time he wanted to go into the house also, something he had not had to do at Grimmauld Place two summers ago. He supposed that Dumbledore had made this charm even stronger.

"That doesn't sound too terribly hard."

"It's not hard, it's just . . . um . . . strange. But there's something else, also." Harry just had a (if he could say so himself) brilliant thought. It really would be quite impossible to have her watch the house appear and he needed to do something to keep her from watching. "You have to close your eyes and . . ." he wondered for a moment if he dared say it, "kiss me."

Her eyes widened in response. "Are you sure about the kissing part, or are you just making that up to tease me?"

"No, I'm serious. And it has to be a good kiss, too. Makes it more likely to work."

She laughed. "Somehow I think you are teasing me."

"Maybe just a little, but I am serious about the kissing."

"Well, if you insist . . . ."

He took her hand and led her around the corner, standing with her in front of the house next to where his would appear, hopefully, in the next few minutes. She didn't seem to think anything looked strange or out of place, and Harry glanced around at the quiet street. He was vulnerable out here and he knew it. There was no one else on the street and he thought that they may as well get it over with. He glanced down at the paper, still folded in her hand, "Go ahead, Cassie."

"All right." She opened the paper, scanning it quickly and then her eyes met his.

"Think about what you read, now, and then close your eyes, okay?"

She closed her eyes and Harry allowed himself to think hard about the address also, for just a moment before he concentrated on the girl in front of him. He took her shoulders in his hands and bent toward her, meeting her soft mouth with his, amazed again at how wonderful it was to kiss her. She put her arms around his neck, and kissed him back with all the fervor she had the night before, and Harry tilted his head a little bit to deepen the kiss as he drew her closer. His eyes were open and he saw the house as it appeared as always with a soft pop. Of course, that did not prove anything. He had never doubted that he would be able to see it. The big question was if she would be able to. He drew away from her reluctantly, kissing her softly on the corner of her mouth to soften the departure, and her eyes fluttered open.

"That was a pretty good kiss, Cassie. Hopefully, it worked." He turned her in his arms so that she was facing the house but he didn't dare ask if she saw it.



"Oh, it's cute, isn't it? It seems to be a nice neighborhood. Kind of old-fashioned looking, but friendly. How do I know if the house is going to let me in?" Harry felt such relief at her statement, that his knees almost gave out under him. She could at least see his house, and had not noticed that it hadn't been there when they walked onto the street. Harry had never really thought of the place as cute, but then usually he was hurrying. Speaking of hurrying, they had better. He walked forward with her quickly to the foot of the stairs and looked up to the door. There was only one more hurdle to get over. The nosy doorbell and his ridiculous password. He stepped up onto the first step, and she followed him. She didn't fall through the step onto the sidewalk or get stuck in any sort of magical trick staircase, just followed him up silently until they came to the door. The doorbell immediately started in, exactly as Harry had feared. "I am quite sure that she would not be on Dumbledore's list of approved visitors. A Muggle? Honestly! How do you know she is safe?" Harry did not really hear the rest because he had clamped his hand over the doorbell, hoping to muffle any further sound. Cassie was looking around for the source of the noise, thinking that someone else on the street was talking. He did not correct her assumption. Harry bent close to the doorbell and said very clearly, "Sir Cadogan." He thought that if this door didn't open immediately, he was going to have to get violent.

"Bless you." Harry realized with a smile that she thought he had sneezed, but then the door swung open on silent hinges, and he pushed the door open wide, stepped inside, and reached out a hand to help her across the threshold. She stepped through into the coolness of the entrance hall, and Harry could have jumped for joy. It had worked! The doorbell was continuing its lecture and without Harry's hand covering it, it was much easier to understand. "I really must protest this blatant . . . ." Harry slammed the door quickly, cutting the little speech off and then he started doing up the locks quickly behind them, anxious to get the house invisible again. She watched with a raised eyebrow, but said nothing, maybe considering having six locks on a front door a minor oddity compared with what she had just done. She also did not mention hearing someone talking outside the door, a fact for which Harry thanked every lucky star he ever had. He didn't want to have to explain that.

She turned toward him. "I guess it worked, huh? Whatever we did? Must have been a good kiss." He took the piece of parchment out of her unresisting fingers, setting it on the hall table, and smiled.

"It was a great kiss."

"I was thinking, though," she said laughing, "that maybe we should practice a little, just to make sure we get it perfect."

"I think you may have something there." Harry set the bag with the VCR down on the table next to the parchment and turned toward her. The sense of relief and joy that he felt at this moment was incredible. She was leaning back against the door, smiling at him, and he moved closer to her, intent on starting practice immediately. Then, a quiet snore permeated his consciousness and he had a sudden thrill of horror. The portrait of Sir Lionel was in his living room, and it sounded like he was snoring, as always. That might be a little hard to explain, even though she seemed willing to overlook most odd things. "Um, Cassie. Will you wait here just a second? I have to move some stuff out of the living room."

"You don't have to clean for me. I don't mind if you have stuff around. I'm used to messy brothers." She reached for his hand, trying to tug him toward her.

"This could be a little embarrassing. Just give me a minute, okay?"

"Well, if you insist." She pouted a little to tease him, and he wanted to kiss away the sulky grin she flashed but instead he ran quickly into the living room, grabbed the noisy portrait and moved quickly into his bedroom, where he set it on his night stand, facing the wall. He shut the bedroom door behind him and moved back into the entrance hall to find her standing where he had left her, looking around the bare entryway. This house, which had always seemed to him like a gloomy prison, suddenly seemed warm and friendly, and he honestly thought at that moment that he would be content to never leave as long as she stayed here with him.

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P.S. The title of this chapter has confused some people. The charm was not removed from the house, it was just "undone" temporarily to let Cassie in - presumably not what Dumbledore had in mind.

## Chapter 26

### Quills and Questions

Harry moved automatically toward the hall table and removed his wallet and wand without thinking about it. It was a habit now, with the wand handy for when he had to leave the house. He turned back to Cassie, wanting to continue where they had stopped a minute before. Her eyes were not on him, though; they were focused on his wand, which now was laying there on the table next to the folded piece of parchment and his wallet. Harry had a moment's worry. What would she think now that she saw it for the first time? She walked over to the table and stared down at it.

"Harry? It's beautiful. I guess I never thought it would look like this!" She moved to touch it and must have sensed the sudden tension in his body, because she drew her hand back and glanced up at him. "Sorry."

"No, it's all right." He forced himself to relax. She wasn't going to hurt it or anything. "Go ahead and touch it if you want to."

"It looks like a . . . a baton, like a conductor's baton."

"Yeah. I guess it does." Her fingers touched the polished wood carefully and she picked it up from the table.

"It's light, but kind of long and pokey. Doesn't it hurt you when you wear it under your shirt like that?"

"I'm used to it, actually. But I sure don't complain when I get home and get to put it down."

"I still don't . . . oh, never mind. I promised you I wouldn't ask, didn't I?"

"I do vaguely remember that conversation." Cassie lay the wand back down on the table and she walked toward Harry and threw her arms around him tightly, hugging him really hard. "Oof! What's that for?" She looked up into his face, smiling brightly.

"I've never been able to hug you without that thing poking me in the arm or rib cage or something. I want to know what it feels like to hug you without it!"

Harry laughed, the bubbly feeling that had been growing since she had carefully stepped through the door a few minutes ago finally exploding into joy. "Well, don't let me stop you. Hug away!" They stood there for another few seconds until Cassie finally drew back.

"Am I going to get to see any part of your house except for the entry hall?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess you would probably like to see the rest. It's not much, I should warn you."

"I'm sure it's perfectly wonderful, Harry. You live here, remember?" He blushed furiously. She had the knack of saying the most incredible things that made him really embarrassed. They went first into the kitchen and Harry was glad he had not taken the time to eat breakfast that morning as that meant the kitchen was very clean and presentable. Cassie glanced around and smiled approvingly. Harry mentioned the stove and other appliances were old but that they seemed to do well enough.

They then went back out into the entry hall and from there into a small hallway which had two doors. On their right was the bathroom. Harry opened the door and pointed saying, "Here's the bathroom. It's small but that's okay." Cassie nodded.

"You keep your house nice and clean."

"Thanks. I haven't been here much lately, though."

"Um, I wonder why."

Harry hesitated a moment before opening the bedroom door, wondering if Cassie would notice Sir Lionel's snoring. He opened the door, pointed in and said, "And here's my bedroom." Cassie stood at the doorway and looked in, fortunately not expressing any interest in

entering. Harry waited a couple of seconds and then shut the door again and looked at Cassie and said, "Well, there's only one room left. Let's go."

They went back into the entry hall where Harry picked up the box with the VCR. They then continued into the living room. The furniture was old and well used and lumpy. Most of it was uncomfortable. There was a couch and a coffee table. Near the couch was a large easy chair with a sort of ottoman/foot stool that Harry had never tried to put his feet on. There was a small table beside the chair that had a rather dingy looking lamp on it. Across from the couch and chair was the TV on a small stand. At the far end of the room stood a desk on which was the barely-admitted to telephone, and a stack of parchment as well as the envelopes and stamps Harry used to write to Dumbledore every morning.

Cassie surveyed the room, finally noticing the desk and telephone. She looked at Harry and said in a halfway-accusing voice, "And there is the infamous telephone."

Harry blushed and explained, "Honestly, Cassie, I wasn't sure about the number, and I . . . ." Harry stopped. He had promised her that he wouldn't lie to her. He started again. "I haven't used it. I'm not sure it works. I've always called you from the phone box down the street." She smiled.

"It doesn't really matter, I guess." Cassie took the box from Harry and said, "I'll take a look at the directions. Your telly is really old. I just hope we can hook this thing up to it." With that she sat down on the couch and Harry helped her open the box. There were multiple cords and wires and cables in the box along with a very thick instruction booklet. Harry glanced at the back cover and gasped. It really was in a foreign language, just like she had said. Cassie noted his quick intake of breath and turned the manual over. "Oh, Harry. Don't be silly. That's Greek or something. They print these things in about 20 different languages, see? Here's the English." She spent the next few moments reading the directions while Harry sat in the easy chair and watched her, glad that he wasn't the one trying to figure out this very complicated object. Who would have guessed that such a simple-looking machine would take so much effort to set up.

After a couple of minutes, Cassie stood up and took a deep breath. "I guess I should get started." She pulled the stand and television away from the wall and looked the television over, although Harry was not really sure what she was hoping to see. After a few minutes, she went back over and grabbed the VCR along with several of the cables and wires. She knelt down behind the television and started hooking up things. A minute or two later, she moved around to the front of the set and bent over to hook some wires up to the back of the device. After a second or two, she turned back to Harry and blushed furiously. "Don't stare at me, okay? It's embarrassing." Harry started. He hadn't really realized how avidly he was looking at her. Her T-shirt had worked loose sometime in the course of the afternoon and when she bent over like that, he could see the skin of her back, above the waistband of her jeans. It looked soft, and he had just been wondering what would happen if he were to get down next to her and put his hand . . . Oh, man. He definitely shouldn't even . . . . Her request startled him out of that particular fantasy, and he colored slightly, standing up quickly, hoping that he could keep himself from further humiliation.

Harry cleared his throat. "Sorry. I really didn't mean to . . . I . . . . Hey, Cassie? Do you want something to drink?" He felt hot and thought that something cold might go a long way to making him feel better.

She was bent back over her work and he forced himself to stare at the wall above the television rather than at her. "Sure. What have you got?" At least, he thought that is what she said although it came out kind of garbled.

"I've got juice and Coca-Cola."

She turned around at that, pulling her head out from under the television and pushing some hair back from her forehead. "What kind of juice? You don't mean that pumpkin juice stuff, do you?"

"No," Harry said. "You can't get pumpkin juice around here. It's just regular orange juice."

"Oh," Cassie said, "I think orange juice then, please." Harry left her then to go into the kitchen where he poured both himself some juice. After a couple of minutes he returned. By then, Cassie had the television on and was just finishing tightening the last wire. She sat back, brushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes again and said, "This was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I guess because the set is so old. I'm tired." She took the juice from him with a grateful smile. "I think I've got it, though."

"Poor thing. You've been working like a house-elf," Harry said, feeling slightly guilty about how much work she had done on his behalf.

Cassie turned to him with a puzzled expression and asked, "What?"

"Oh nothing," Harry mumbled quickly, realizing that he had made another slip of the tongue. "It's just an expression of Ron's -- you know, my friend from school."

Cassie smiled and said, "Ron really does sound like he has an interesting sense of humor. I think you said that is one of the things you like about him." She unwrapped the video they had purchased and said, "Now comes the big test. Did I do it right?" She slipped the video into the VCR and a moment later, the cartoon came on. It was one Harry recognized from the days when Dudley still watched cartoons. Cassie beamed and said, "Well, there you go."

She was still sitting on the floor, cross-legged. Harry sat down next to her. They finished their juice in companionable silence. Harry patted her knee. "Thank you, Cassie. You were definitely right, much as I hate to admit it. I couldn't have done it without you." She smiled broadly. Harry stood up and reached down to help her to her feet. She walked back over to the box and started throwing in the trash, then reached in and pulled out a small bag.

"Oh yeah. I almost forgot." said Cassie. "You don't happen to have two extra double A batteries around, do you?"

"What?" asked Harry, confused momentarily by her question.



Cassie explained, "You have a remote to work the VCR. But you need two double A batteries. Maybe you can buy them the next time you go shopping." Harry thought he still must have looked unsure of what she was asking because she laughed. "I'll jot it down for you so you don't forget. Plus, I believe you owe me homemade biscuits and I'm fairly sure you don't have the ingredients around, so I'll make a list of what you need for those, also." Harry watched as she walked to the desk and started to look around it. She did not seem to be able to find what she wanted because after a minute, she said, "I see paper here, but no pencil or pen. Have you got a pen somewhere?"

Uh, oh. This was not going to go over well. "No. Sorry."

"Well, you must have something to write with."

"Actually, well . . . ." That annoying promise he had made to never lie to her popped into his mind again. "I honestly do not have a pen or a pencil."

She looked at him askance. "Yeah? I get the idea there is more behind that sentence."

"Okay. I only have a . . . quill."

"A what?"

"A quill. You know, like an old-fashioned sort of . . ."

"A quill pen? You are kidding me."

"Uh, no. Hang on a second." He opened the top drawer of the desk and pulled out his bottle of ink and quill. They normally sat on top of the desk but earlier this morning he had stuffed them in the drawer when he had knocked them off with a bag of laundry. "There." He sheepishly held them up for Cassie to see.

She had a look of shock on her face when she exclaimed, "Wow, you really do go to school in a monastery!"

"I do not go to school in a monastery! They just like sort of, um, traditional things at my school."

"Yeah, I guess so. If I were you, I think I would smuggle in some ball-points. You could make a fortune selling them to other suffering students."

"Oh, they're not so bad." He was still holding out the quill to her, expecting her to take it.

"You don't really think I'm going to be writing with that thing, do you?"

"Uh, . . . ."

"Well, I'm not going to. I would just make a huge mess. You'll have to make the list."

"Okay." Harry grabbed the top piece of parchment, dipped the quill into the ink bottle and wrote, "Two a batteries."

"No, double A batteries."

"Oh, sorry." He crossed off the first line, and wrote carefully underneath, "Two double a batteries." He stopped and looked at her. "Is that going to mean something to someone at the store?"

"Yeah. It's just the size of battery that you need. Someone can help you. Now let's think biscuit ingredients."

"All right." He dipped his quill again into the ink and waited for her to say something. She started listing pretty standard biscuit ingredients and he wrote each word carefully, trying to spell them correctly so he didn't look stupid. When the list was completed, he set it aside to let it dry, and started to put the top back on the bottle of ink.

"Wait. Everything looks so elegant when you write it with that quill thing. Could you, . . ." Harry was surprised when she flushed a little. "Could you write my name with it?"

"Sure." He concentrated hard on his handwriting, forming each letter carefully so it would look nice. A few moments later, the paper saying Cassiopeia Robinson was being examined with wide eyes.

"It's gorgeous. I love it. Do yours now."

"Oh, I write my name all the time with it."

"I know. But I've never seen it."

"Fine then, silly." He grabbed a clean piece of parchment and wrote almost automatically "Harry J." He stopped. He had started using his middle initial during the last year. A small vanity. A small reminder of his dad. He moved to crumple it up and start over again, but she stopped his hand.

"J. For James, I gather."

"Yeah." They both stood there silently for another moment, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

"Don't redo it. Finish it." He was grateful she didn't ask anything more.

He put the quill back into the bottle and put the point against the J. He wrote carefully, James. Then he even more carefully wrote the unfamiliar word, Evans. She didn't seem to notice that these movements were not so automatic.

"Do you mind if I keep this?" He considered this a moment. If the wrong person saw that paper, it could be bad for him.

"Why do you want it?"

"I just . . ." Her face turned a delightful shade of pink. "To remind me of you. When you're gone. You won't be here long, will you, Harry?" He shook his head slowly, unsure of where that had come from. "It didn't really sink in until I saw this place. You don't have one single thing here that belongs to you. You don't live here, at all, do you? You are just staying here for as short a time as possible." She was talking very fast now, obviously more upset about this than he had realized.

Her voice was getting louder, and underneath it, he could hear the frustration and unshed tears. He pulled her into his arms again, like he had on the street a few hours ago, and let her cry. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I promised myself. . . . I know . . . this is only temporary. I'm only temporary. And that's really okay. I just . . . I'm going to miss you so much." He continued to hold her for a long time, his head resting against hers, wishing desperately that he could promise that he was never going to leave her, but he knew that would be a very big lie.

"You can keep the paper. Just do me a favor, all right? Don't show it around to people until after I'm gone. Then, it won't matter anymore."

"I can do that." Her voice sounded firmer now; she was getting another grip on herself, and Harry released her from his hold.

"I'm going to miss you, too, Cassie. So much." This time, their kiss was soft, full of words that he, at least, knew he could never say to her. She seemed to acknowledge that with her careful response to his touch, and when they pulled apart, they stood with their foreheads together for a moment, breathing the same air, and Harry thought that it was almost more intimate than the actual touching of mouths.

"Let's just try to enjoy what we do have, okay?" Cassie said, smiling tremulously. "That way, we'll always have good things to remember."

"Yeah. I can do that." She stepped carefully out of the circle of his arms, wiping at her cheeks with a hand that was still a little shaky. She turned her wrist and glanced at her watch. Apparently, it was telling her that it was later than she thought.

"I'd better get home. My mum was counting on my helping with dinner tonight."

"I'll walk you home."

"I'll be fine. I noticed how we came."

"I don't want you walking home by yourself. I'll take you."

"Okay." She picked up the two pieces of parchment from the desk and folded them carefully together, tucking them into her purse so they wouldn't get crumpled. Harry stepped into the hall while she was in the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face. He picked up the parchment, the wallet, and the wand. He hadn't yet concealed it again under his T-shirt when she walked in the room to join him. "You could put that in your back pocket instead."

"Yeah. I've sometimes carried it like that. It's just that someone could grab it there. Plus it's harder to get to."

"All right." She was quiet now, and Harry wanted to say something to tease her gently, to bring back the laughter in her eyes. But, almost like she could read his mind, she smiled brightly, her natural happiness hard to suppress. "Tell me, do I have to kiss you to get out of the house, also?"

"Hmmm. What if I said yes?"

"I'd know you were lying." She laughed at the crestfallen expression on his face. "Maybe I'll make you kiss me to get into my house, though."

"That would be terrible."

"Wouldn't it though?" They were both smiling at the silliness as he opened the locks quickly and they stepped out onto the steps. She turned as they stepped down. "I thought not. You have no locks on the outside of the door, but about 100 on the inside. How does that work?"

Harry didn't answer, thinking at the moment about getting her down the steps and away from the house so that it could disappear again without her noticing. She didn't press the issue, and was several steps away from the bottom step when Harry heard the soft pop indicating that the house was gone. They turned the corner and Harry took Cassie's hand, sliding his fingers between hers in the way that had become as familiar to him as breathing.

She said then, "Never mind. I shouldn't have asked."

"I can't explain, Cassie. I'm not sure I really understand it myself." That was true although maybe not in the way she would think he meant. She didn't push the issue and they walked home, talking very little, but enjoying the time together all the same. He liked that she didn't have to keep up a continuous stream of chatter. Sometimes quiet could be just as nice as talking.

When they arrived back at the Robinson's house, Cassie's mum came out to meet them as they kissed goodbye on the porch. "How about staying for dinner, Harry?" Harry was going to decline, unsure if he wanted to impose on their hospitality again. But the look of welcome in Cassie's eyes convinced him that it wouldn't be an imposition, and he agreed to stay.

"Now, let's see," he said quietly as he followed her into the house. "I believe you said something about my owing you a kiss."

## Chapter 27

### How Do You Spell W-I-Z-A-R-D?

The first few minutes inside the Robinson home were a little awkward for Harry as he watched Mrs. Robinson and Cassie bustle around the kitchen preparing dinner. He wanted to offer to help but was kind of shy about asking. He had no idea what he could really do to help as his very fledgling cooking skills were probably inadequate. They did seem to be doing a lot of chopping, though. Harry was pretty good at chopping things - lots of potions practice - but he wasn't sure that being qualified to cut dragon liver into equal mince would win him a lot of points at dinner tonight. Well, he sincerely hoped not.

He also had to admit that watching Cassie in the kitchen was enjoyable. Of course, watching her do anything was enjoyable. He flushed a little remembering how he had been caught staring at Cassie earlier that afternoon and tried to make sure that he was not looking at certain parts of her anatomy as he did not want her to get mad at him again and certainly would have been completely embarrassed if her mother had noticed him staring at her . . . Well, it just would be too humiliating. The fact that she had walked out onto the porch a few minutes ago when Harry was kissing Cassie did not help alleviate his nerves. Harry hoped that Cassie's parents did not think he was being too forward with her. She had said her parents wouldn't mind as long as they behaved themselves, but Harry wasn't sure exactly what that meant. All he knew is that when he was with her, he kept wanting to kiss her and hold her. It was probably best that they stayed at her house this evening.

Just when Harry had decided to stay in a corner of the kitchen and try to be as inconspicuous as possible, Mrs. Robinson smiled at him and asked if he would be willing to set the table. Cassie helped him find all the plates and glasses and Harry stepped into the dining room.

When the Robinsons and Harry finally sat down to dinner, they enjoyed a large chef salad (which explained all the chopping Harry had witnessed) and some sort of multi-grained rolls. Harry was a little hesitant to try them, fearing they might taste like Hagrid's rock cakes. They kind of looked like them. However, he decided to be brave when

he saw the boys eating happily. After all, if a 7-year-old could eat them, how bad could they be? He was pleasantly surprised after his first tentative bite, and was buttering his roll when Mr. Robinson looked at Cassie and asked, "So, what did the two of you do today?"

Cassie said, "Well, we had lunch at the pizza place and then went and bought Harry a VCR. He didn't have one, you know. Then we went to his house and set it up. It works great."

"Well, that's nice," Mr. Robinson remarked as he reached for more salad.

"While we were there," Cassie continued, "Harry wrote my name with his quill pen. He doesn't have any regular pens, just a quill pen -- and a bottle of ink." Harry swallowed hard, choking down a bite of his roll that suddenly felt like the size of an entire loaf of bread. He wished that Cassie had not brought that up. It just emphasized again how different he was from "normal" people and he was trying not to let them know exactly how different he really was. Cassie's mother wanted to see what the writing looked like, so Cassie got up from the table and ran into her bedroom to get it. Harry noticed that she only brought out the one piece of paper - the one that had her name written on it. She had done as he had asked and kept his secret. He relaxed slightly. She passed it around the table and everyone admired it. Harry thought they were making a big deal of nothing; his handwriting was usually criticized by his professors as being careless and sloppy. Of course, he had done his best and there were no ink blots or smears. He normally did not worry that much about his homework parchments. He blushed under everyone's praise and concentrated on eating while she ran the paper back into her room.

Both of her parents looked at Harry with odd expressions. Mrs. Robinson was the first to break the small silence when she asked, "Does everyone use quill pens and bottles of ink at your school?"

Harry nodded and said, "Yeah. That's what all the students and teachers use."

"Why?" asked Cassie's mother.



Harry replied, "I really don't know - that's just what we use." And this was the truth. He wasn't sure why they used quill pens at Hogwarts rather than ball point pens. That's just the way it had always been, he supposed. Cassie returned after this comment, sliding into the chair next to Harry with a smile.

She continued on with her description of their day as though she had never left the table, "Plus, you're not going to believe what we had to do to get into Harry's house . . . ." Cassie began, but Harry realized what she was about to say and he gave a small shake of his head. Cassie sucked in her breath and bit her lip. To Harry's relief, no one noticed what she had begun to say as Matthew and John had started arguing about a game they had played earlier in the day, apparently not as enraptured with the idea of quill-pen writing as the adults. Their parents had given their full attention to the boys and had missed Cassie's statement completely.

Harry turned his attention back to his dinner, smiling at Cassie reassuringly. He finished his roll and was helping himself to some more salad when a sudden familiar sharp pain shot across his forehead. Completely taken by surprise, Harry dropped the salad tongs, caught his breath in a sudden cry of pain, and pressed his right hand tightly over his throbbing scar. He immediately felt foolish as every eye at the table turned toward him, staring as one at his hand still pressed over his face. Harry lowered his hand quickly, knowing there was no help for it now. He assumed they already knew about the scar, but that did not mean he wanted everyone to be staring at it. "Sorry," he muttered quietly, staring down at his empty plate, and feeling warmth creep up his neck.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed, dear," said Mrs. Robinson gently. "Cassie told us that you had a scar that hurts all the time. Can we get you something for it?"

"No, thank you. It will feel better in a minute." Harry was really embarrassed now.

"I think you should take something, Harry," Cassie interjected.

"I really don't think it will help." Harry had been experimented on more than he cared to remember by Madam Pomfrey who had tried every pain remedy known in the wizarding world when last year his scar had hurt him to the point of insanity for one week straight. Nothing really helped. He had even been desperate enough to try a potion Snape brewed for him on that occasion, even though he had sincerely feared he may not survive the experience. So he had come to the unwelcome conclusion that nothing helped curse scar pain except time and distance. He was used to a fairly steady low level of tingling all the time now, and the only reason he had even reacted a few minutes ago was because he was surprised. He had not felt the sharp stabbing pain for about a week or so, and it caught him, as always, unprepared for it.

Harry suddenly jumped in his chair. Cassie's cool fingers brushed his bangs, and she trailed them gently over the jagged lightning bolt on his forehead. He automatically grabbed her wrist and pushed her hand away from it. She looked a little hurt at his abrupt rejection of her touch, but she put her hand back in her lap and tried to smile at the rest of the family like it had been her own idea. Everyone was still looking at him. Harry also plastered a smile on his face. "The pain's all gone now. Sorry to disturb dinner like that." After a moment or two, everyone except for Harry and Cassie went back to eating their dinner and talking. Cassie picked at the salad that she still had left on her plate, smiling faintly when anyone asked her anything. Harry felt terrible. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings - it was more of a gut reaction than anything. Most people didn't like to really touch his scar, stare at it, yes, but not touch it. She had caught him by surprise and he had reacted badly. He wanted to talk to her, to tell her he was sorry but this was not really the best time or place for it.

Dinner was finally over after what seemed to Harry like an interminable hour, although he supposed in reality it was only a few minutes. After dinner, everybody started helping to clear the dishes and Harry took his own plate and silverware off the table and carried them into the kitchen. He was about to go back for a second load when Cassie's mum firmly pushed both Harry and Cassie out of the kitchen into the family room. "You do not need to help with the dishes tonight, Harry. You go relax in the other room. Cassie, see if you can

convince him to take something for his head." They stood in the other room awkwardly for a moment or two. Then they both spoke at once.

"Cassie, I . . . ."

"Harry, I . . . ."

They both laughed nervously and tried again, "I didn't mean to . . . ." Again, they spoke together.

"All right." This time it was just Harry. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You just surprised me, that's all. And I embarrassed you and I really feel bad."

"I feel bad I embarrassed you. I didn't mean to." Cassie tried one more time, reaching up gently to brush the dark hair off his forehead. This time, when her cool fingers traced gently over the mark, he stood still and let her touch him. It really did feel nice. Harry had not been strictly truthful about the pain in his scar. It was still there, although to a greatly decreased degree, and her soft brush against it actually made it feel a little better.

However, something was still bothering Harry. "Do your parents think I'm some kind of a freak? They know about the scar and everything . . . ."

"No, I'm sure they don't think you're a freak. It's just a scar."

Harry felt a lot better. He decided he would be brave and reached for Cassie. She came willingly into his arms and they stood there for a couple of minutes before they were interrupted by her brothers, who ran into the room straight toward Harry. As they were forcefully separated by the two boys, who wanted to play with Harry, Cassie laughed and asked, "So, can you stay for a little while?" Harry thought for a moment and realized he had spent a good amount of time at home that day and was, therefore, he decided, justified if he stayed out for a while longer. "I think that would be great." Harry started tickling John while Matthew climbed on his back.

"Well," Harry said a few minutes later when John had run into the other room after Harry had tickled him into submission, "What do you want to do?" Personally, he wouldn't have minded just sitting and staring at her all night, but he decided not to suggest that option.

"Would you like to play a game?"

"Sure. Do you play chess?"

Cassie looked a little embarrassed and said, "No, I've never learned how. But I wouldn't mind learning sometime."

"I'll keep that in mind. I love playing chess. Ron and I play all the time at school." Cassie opened a cupboard where Harry could see a selection of board games, none of which he recognized.

"Do you like Monopoly?" Cassie asked, and it was Harry's turn to look a little embarrassed.

"Well," he hesitated and then mumbled, "Not really." He had played the wizard version of the game once and had not enjoyed it at all.

Cassie thought for a moment, looking over the selection, and then smiled, "Hey, how about Scrabble?" Harry had never heard of Scrabble.

"What is it?"

"It's a word game. You spell out words. It's really easy to play and fun, too."

"Oh, a word game, great," responded Harry with visions of Hermione dancing around in expectation of entertainment like this. Harry hoped he knew some words. At the moment, any that he once knew were gone out of his brain.

Cassie laughed and grabbed the game off the shelf. They quickly set up a card table, laid out the game, and Cassie gave a quick explanation how to play. As she was explaining Matthew sauntered over and asked if he could join in. Harry could tell that Cassie was not

too excited about the idea, but she seemed to swallow any sharp retort she was going to make and she said instead, "Sure." As they sat down, Cassie said, "I should warn you, Harry, I'm pretty good at this game. I hope you don't mind if I beat you."

"Don't mind at all. Since it's my first time playing, I have no pride."

They all drew a tile to see who played first and Matthew won by drawing an A. Everybody started drawing at once, then, until they each had seven tiles on the little tray in front of them.

Harry stared at his tiles and tried to think of words he could make with the horrible collection of letters he had in front of him. He had drawn the letters Q, R, N, G, A, O, and an F. Somehow, he thought to himself with a grin, he did not think they would accept goranfQ as a word. Unless something good happened before it got around to him, he would have to settle for rag as his word; not too great. Matthew went first and tried with a word "angr."

"ANGER. And that is 10 points for me."

"Well, it would be, but that is not how you spell anger," said Cassie gently.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Do you have an E or a Y? You could use those to make a real word."

"I have an E."

"Okay, then, put it between the G and R."

"Okay, then I get 12 points."

Cassie added a D to the front of Matthew's word to spell DANGER.

Harry sat and looked at his letters again. He could go ahead and spell RAG like he had planned off the R but thought he could maybe be a little more adventurous. "Oh," he said, suddenly seeing an alternative. He used the D and spelled DRAGON. There, that was better. He got

16 points for it and took the lead temporarily. Maybe this wouldn't be such a disaster after all.

They each took another turn, with Harry spelling ELF after Cassie used the N in dragon to spell the word ZEN. Matthew got stuck after that and called for his mother to come help him. While they were waiting, Cassie stood up and came to stand behind Harry. She put her hands on his shoulders and bent down to his ear. He felt shivers down his back from the feel of her breath on his ear.

"How are you doing? Really?" Harry laughed and hid his tiles behind his hands. He didn't want to answer the question. His scar hurt like the blazes. He didn't want to lie to her, though.

"Spying on me, are you? I thought you said you were very good at this? Don't tell me you have to cheat to win?"

"Oh, honestly!" Harry was teasing her, of course, but Cassie flounced back to her chair, nose in the air. "I can beat you blindfolded. I don't need to cheat." Just then her mother came in to help Matthew.

"Um, how about using the P to spell APE?" She stayed for a minute and glanced at the board, her eyebrows raising slightly at the words. She left the room a moment later, not saying anything more.

Matthew got 10 points for APE and then Cassie added S to Harry's ELF and got 18 points for the two words together, SO and SELF. Harry had a rather motley collection of letters on his tray. He still had the Q from his first draw which was essentially useless. He thought about spelling LION and was just about to play that off of the N from DANGER when the G caught his eye. Could he? Yes! He spelled out GOBLIN easily and got 10 points for it. He was now in second place, which he thought was pretty decent. Another round started with Matthew who turned his APE into SCRAPE which thrilled Cassie as it gave her a free S. She used it to spell the word KISS for 18 points which she was thrilled about. Matthew, however, started giving her a very bad time about choosing that particular word. Both Harry and Cassie were blushing a few seconds later as he announced that he had seen them kissing, a few times, and that he thought it was rather gross.

Then it was Harry's turn and he stared for a long time at his letters. He couldn't really see anything to spell with his tiles which now consisted of the blasted Q, which Harry despaired of ever being able to use because there was no U on the board yet and he hadn't drawn one, two Os, two Ls, a B, and an R. He was just about to pass and turn in his Q for a new letter when he suddenly saw an option. He used the F from his ELF and spelled FLOO. He sat back, feeling relieved, and counted up his 7 points.

"Hey, that's not how you spell flu." Cassie was smiling. "You're as bad as Matthew."

"Are you sure? I thought this was a fireplace chimney, you know?"

"No. That is flue. Then you've got flu, the sickness, and of course, flew, as in the bird flew away, but I am positive there is no word floo."

"Oh." Harry knew that the word was spelled that way for floo powder, as he had seen that word written many times, but could not really argue the point. "Sorry." Great. Now he had not only embarrassed himself but he also still needed to think of a word. He removed his L, O, O and started looking. He could just use LOO on the L right above his F, except that Cassie had ZEN there, and his DRAGON and it wouldn't work. He looked toward the top of the board and saw Cassie's K there from KISS. He was going to do BOOK, but then changed his mind at the last minute and spelled BROOK. There, that was a word for sure. Plus, because he put the B on a double word square, he got 20 points for it.

When he drew this time, he got that elusive U and immediately tried to figure out where he could use his Q to the best advantage. Both Matthew and Cassie played and it was Cassie's spelling the word NETTLE that finally gave him an idea. Laughing, he spelled out QUILL and both Cassie and Matthew groaned. Harry was especially pleased because with the 28 points from that word he moved into first place, only two ahead of Cassie, but still . . . .. At least he wasn't being too humiliated.

The next round went smoothly and both Matthew and Cassie took yet another turn without incident. When it was Harry's turn, he tried really hard to think of a good word. He still had the lead even before this turn, but he knew this was probably only temporary. He hoped that he could place a really good word and increase his lead. He debated for a couple of minutes about this particular word - he didn't want to put any strange thoughts in Cassie's head. But the double word score was too tempting. Finally, he bit his lip and put it down. WAND. He got 16 points for it which gave him 118 to her 96. He watched her a little nervously. She looked at his latest addition, looked again, and then looked up at him. Her eyes narrowed a little, and then she shook her head and Harry could see her visibly relax. He hoped he hadn't just made a big miscalculation. He really did not want her to connect that word with the stick he carried around with him at all times and even now had tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

Matthew was completely stumped for his next word and even though both Cassie and Harry offered him help, he refused, saying that they would just use his word to give themselves a good set-up for their next word. Instead, he hollered for his mother again, who hollered back that she would be there in a few minutes. So Cassie and Harry started talking as Matthew ran into the kitchen to find her and beg her to come sooner.

"Harry, I can tell that your head is still hurting. Please let me get you something."

"It won't help, Cassie. I've tried stuff before."

"What have you tried?"

"Well, you know, the usual . . . uh, aspirin. Besides," he said, trying to divert her attention, "it just hurts a little bit, now." That was the truth. The pain had receded to its usual dull ache and Harry wouldn't have noticed it at all if it weren't for the concern in the back of his brain about what was happening in the wizarding world. The fact was that when he had pain in his scar, something was going on. He would need to try to figure out what. But that was something for tomorrow. Tonight, he just wanted to enjoy being with Cassie. Besides that, he was winning. This game was more fun than he had expected.



"Aspirin? Harry, I could at least. . . ." she continued, but Harry really wanted her to drop the subject. He reached over to her, pushed his hand through the thickness of her hair and pulled her face close to him.

"Hey, we may only have a minute." Then he kissed her, which satisfactorily got her mind off the subject of his curse scar. Very satisfactorily.

Matthew and his mum came back a minute after that, and Harry hoped his blush didn't give them away. Mrs. Robinson looked at Matthew's tiles and the board. "Quid, dear."

"Where?"

"Use the Q."

"Oh, yeah. That'll work."

Harry thought that he could certainly play off one of those letters and started desperately trying to figure out a good word. So he missed completely what Cassie did until she let out a victory whoop and stood up to do a little dance about her word. He looked up to the top of the board to see what she had done. She had used his W from WAND to spell WAVY which wound up being a 26-point word and put her back ahead of him. He couldn't be too disappointed. It was an excellent word. She really was very good at this. He hoped that he could come up with a word to put him in the lead again. He saw a word that would work but he really didn't want to use it. He tried several different possibilities in his head, even putting letters down on the board once before he realized that the word ran off the side and would not work. Finally, because he was desperate, he went ahead and used it. It was a nice normal word, GIANT. Nothing wrong with it at all. It was only 8 points, but he was back in the lead.

Mrs. Robinson had been standing behind Matthew to help him in the next round since he had not gotten very good letters in his last draw. When Harry put that word down, he noticed that her eyes got fairly round in surprise. "I say, Harry. I'm starting to see a definite trend on

this board. So far you have used elf, dragon, giant, and goblin." Harry felt a very distinct sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had not realized how incriminating all these innocent sounding words were when you put them all together. And that was not even counting the words wand and quill. How stupid could one person be? Mrs. Robinson continued, "You must read a lot of Tolkien."

"Who?" Harry was not quite sure what she meant by that, but she at least hadn't said anything about witches and wizards.

"You know, JRR Tolkien."

"Um, no, sorry. I haven't read anything of his." Harry hoped he didn't sound like a completely uneducated idiot. "What has he written?"

Cassie answered his question this time. "The Hobbit, Lord of the Rings, you know? His books are full of giants, wizards, elves, goblins, orcs, dark magic, curses, etc. You may want to . . . ." Her voice trailed off but Harry didn't notice. He felt faint. He was going to be sick. She knew. She obviously knew. All this time . . . . Had she just been playing with him? What was he going to do? How was he -

"Harry, you look sick. Are you okay? Mum, I think Harry's going to pass out. Oh, . . . Oh. Here, let's help him lay down on the floor . . . . No, come on, Harry, lay down. Stop fighting me. Matthew, get a blanket. Well, fine then. Be stubborn." Harry had refused to lay down on the floor or use a blanket or anything else. He concentrated on breathing steadily. He looked fully into her eyes. They were clear and steady. There was no mocking in them at all. Was it possible that she really didn't know? He sat down again in the chair.

"Sorry about that. I just suddenly felt sort of light-headed."

"Are you sure you're okay?" At Harry's nod, they continued the game and when it was Harry's turn again, he used the innocuous word HIM. When it was his turn again, he tried and tried to think of a word that wouldn't be too strange. He really tried. He had a blank, and could have maybe done several different things, but he had a slim 6 point lead which he really wanted to keep. Hoping he wasn't dooming himself, he put down his letters.

POTIONS. "Sorry, I seem to have a one track mind tonight." Harry was thrilled to note, however, that he still had a narrow lead - it was only four points, but he was still ahead and he could tell the game was almost over.

"I guess." Cassie was concentrating hard. She really wanted to win, Harry could tell. Maybe he should let her. Naah.

His next word was HAM. Nothing wrong with that. And he was five points ahead. He just might manage.

Matt emptied his tray with RIB. Then it was Cassie's turn. She smiled, a truly (in Harry's opinion) vicious smile. "Ha! Gotcha!" She put the X down to make the word AX. "Nine points, and I win!!!"

It actually wound up being more than a four-point victory because Harry had a letter V still on his tray that he could not figure out what to do with so he wound up losing four points for it. Cassie was positively beaming. Harry didn't begrudge her. He had plans for when he taught her to play chess. He was certain to win that. He pulled a very happy girl over to him and down into his lap. "Well, congratulations. You really are very good at this."

She blushed a little bit. "You played really well, though. You had some really, uh, interesting words." His arms tightened around her and she leaned against him.

After a minute or two, Harry glanced down at his watch. It was after 10. "I guess I better get going, Cassie. It's been really fun."

"When do I get my homemade biscuits?" She asked a few minutes later as they stood by the door. He really didn't want to leave and she didn't want him to go, so they kept coming up with another thing to talk about. His arms were looped comfortably around her waist and she was tucked against his shoulder.

"Biscuits?"

"Yeah, there was the matter of a bet last night, remember?"

"Vaguely." Harry chuckled warmly.

"Bring them over tomorrow."

"I can't make you biscuits."

"Why not? I gave you a shopping list, remember?"

"Fine. I have a shopping list, but no recipe and no idea what I am doing."

"You are so funny sometimes." Cassie pushed away from him far enough to look up into his face. "Fine. You buy the ingredients and then come over here and I'll find you a recipe and show you what you're doing."

Harry liked that idea. Maybe she would even wind up making them. He wouldn't complain about that. "Come shopping with me tomorrow."

"No way. What's the point of you making me biscuits if I do all the work?"

"I like shopping with you. Please . . . It's more fun if you're there."

"All right. All right." Cassie had a disgusted look on her face but Harry could tell she was trying not to laugh. "Tomorrow then at, what, 2? At our favorite store?"

"Yeah. Two. I'll see you there, then."

Harry kissed her again and reluctantly left. He looked back at least three times as he walked down the street. He could hardly wait until he could see her again.

## Chapter 28

### Cooking Lessons

Harry looked at his watch again and felt the knot in his stomach twist even tighter. It was now 2:10 and Cassie was ten minutes late. She had never been late before and, no matter how many times Harry had looked at his watch and paced back and forth in front of the supermarket, it had not willed Cassie to the store and Harry.

Naturally, the doubts and fears Harry normally kept barely below the surface began percolating to the top and emerging into his consciousness like a parade of little demons sneaking into his thoughts. When he had left the Robinson's the night before, he had thought everything was fine. In fact, he was sure that everything had been fine. Cassie had hugged him goodbye and smiled at him in that special way she had that made Harry's insides feel all fluttery. All night and all today, Harry had hardly been able to think about anything except this afternoon. But now she was ten, no, almost fifteen minutes late, and he began to reconsider yesterday evening, finding fault with everything he had done.

He could not help but wonder if his complaining about his scar had finally convinced her parents that he was too strange for Cassie. Or, even more likely, all the strange words he had used in the Scrabble game had turned them against him. At the thought of some of the words he had used, Harry mentally harangued himself one more time. He could not believe his own carelessness. He had, in fact, chewed himself out all the way home - well, when he wasn't thinking about Cassie's sparkling blue eyes and beautiful smile. When he got back to his house the night before, Harry had definitely noticed a change there, and it wasn't just because Sir Lionel wasn't snoring in the living room. And even though the VCR was conspicuously new and modern looking attached to his old television set, it wasn't that either. It just felt different. More welcoming, somehow. More like home rather than a hotel room or something. He liked that feeling. He liked it a lot. And everywhere he looked, he could remember seeing her and that had made him anxious to see her in these rooms again.

Harry's happy thoughts about Cassie were abruptly jarred out of his mind when he looked at his watch and realized she was now definitely fifteen minutes late. The same old thoughts circulated again. Maybe Cassie had decided he was just a little too weird for her. Or perhaps Cassie's mother had talked with her after he left and told her she did not want her daughter associating with someone like him. After all, they really did not know who this Harry guy was or much about his background. It would not take a genius to know that something was definitely different about him.

Feeling quite miserable and surprisingly lonely, Harry reluctantly went into the supermarket and decided to shop for the items on the list she had given him the day before. If Cassie had not come by the time he had finished he would . . . .What would he actually do? There were not many options. He could go to her house and see what the problem was. Maybe she had gotten sick. She wouldn't be able to call him to let him know, after all. He felt a little better then, but immediately felt guilty for hoping that was what had happened to her. Harry did feel a little better, though, because he had a plan. He always felt better, no matter what he was facing, if he at least had a plan.

With his plan firmly in mind and the doubts, fears, and numerous "what ifs" gnawing at his insides, Harry picked a grocery cart and numbly began to select the items from the shopping list. Looking at the list didn't make him feel any better. He could remember so very clearly writing it out carefully with her dictating to him just the day before. She had been smiling and laughing, then. He wondered if he would ever see her smile again. He involuntarily glanced down at his watch again. 20 minutes.

He even managed to find the double A batteries by himself and picked a package with several in it although he only needed two. 25 minutes. He had no idea how long the batteries would last in the remote. These seemed small. Maybe they would only last for a day or so. Harry had almost finished the shopping when he heard behind him a high-pitched squeak of frustration and delight. There stood Cassie, out of breath and panting slightly, with a light sheen of moisture accentuating her soft skin. She let out an audible sigh of relief and Harry thought he had never heard anything as beautiful.

Cassie quickly moved the last few steps and practically fell into Harry's arms. "I'm so sorry I'm late," she gasped. "My mum had to run some stupid errand and I had to watch the boys. She was sure she would be home in plenty of time but got hung up in traffic. I thought you'd have given up on me by now. I tried to get them ready so that we could all come together but Matthew couldn't find one of his stupid shoes and John was . . . ." Cassie would have kept going, obviously having planned for the last half hour what she was going to say, but Harry kissed her hard and fast and then again and by the time he finished, she seemed to have forgotten everything she was going to mention after all.

She pulled away to look up at him, hugged him hard again, and then pulled out of his arms completely. "I'm all sweaty! I'm sorry! I forgot!"

Harry just pulled Cassie back into his arms. "I don't care. I'm just glad you're here." He hesitated a moment and then continued, "I was afraid you weren't going to come."

Cassie looked into his eyes with a bewildered expression "Why not?" Harry didn't answer, afraid that if he voiced his fears, she might agree with him that he was insane. He'd rather her not think about those things at all. They held each other for another moment or so and Harry found himself thinking how nice she smelled even after she had run all the way there.

After a minute or two, Cassie asked how the shopping had been going. Harry showed her the things he had gotten up to that point. He just had 2-3 more items to get and he had not been able to find them the first time through the store. Cassie examined his list and they moved toward the shelf holding the cocoa powder. Cassie selected the type of powder she liked to use and added it to the cart. At the same time, she looked at the other items in the cart, making sure that Harry had understood the various items on her list and picked up the right things. She gave an approving nod of her head at the cart. She glanced at the corner of the cart where Harry had a bag from a nearby drug store folded around something. "What's that?"

Harry smiled at her. "You'll see later. It's a surprise." After they had double-checked that they had everything, Harry paid the cashier and they started toward the door.

Near the exit, Harry looked automatically over to the newspaper rack and saw a newspaper that caught his attention immediately. The very large headline read "Giants Seen In Scottish Highlands." Harry did a double-take and then wordlessly thrust the bag into Cassie's hands and snatched up the copy of The Sun. He rapidly began to read the front page article as Cassie stared at him open-mouthed, juggling the weight of the bag in her arms to make it easier to hold. Regaining her voice after a second, she said, "I can't believe you are looking at that paper. I really thought you had a little more, uh, class."

"Hmmm?" Harry mumbled as he scanned the article. It was an obviously highly sensationalistic account of how two backpackers in the Scottish highlands the week before had claimed to have seen not one, but two, giants who had screamed at and threatened the astonished tourists. The two men had run for their lives, telling their tale to anyone who would listen. Harry read the description of the giants with interest. It was fairly accurate as far as he could tell. He had met a giant once and, of course, one of his best friends was half giant. He did kind of wonder how the giants had threatened the hikers as they didn't speak English very well at all; but he figured sign language from a giant would be fairly plain to read - especially if it involved any sort of squashing. It was hard to believe exactly how big giants really were unless you had seen one. He had always described them as "too big to be allowed." He became aware of Cassie talking to him again and tuned in to her, continuing to read as quickly as possible.

"That paper there," Cassie continued, sounding fairly disgusted, "has silly, unbelievable articles and then it has that smut in it."

"Does it?" Harry asked, not really paying attention to what she was saying, trying to focus on the parts of the story that seemed believable.

"Yes . . . ." Cassie answered a little sarcastically, "You know? Page three?"



"Uh, huh," Harry mumbled as he came to the end of the article and began to turn to continue the article on another page.

Cassie grabbed at the paper and exclaimed, "Well! Don't turn to it!"

Harry looked up in surprise, focusing fully on her for the first time since he had picked up the paper, "Turn to what?"

"Page three, of course," Cassie retorted, blushing a little. "That's where they have, well, you know -- that's the, well. . . . the picture." Harry gave Cassie a puzzled look and said, "I was going to turn to page eight. That's where the article continues."

"Oh," mumbled Cassie, turning a shade pinker. "So what great article are you reading?" The sarcasm in her voice was new to Harry. She sounded more like Hermione for a minute. She looked over Harry's shoulder at the other copies of The Sun, adjusting the bag again, obviously anxious to hand it back to him. "Are you reading about the latest royal scandal, or the latest on the love life of Hugh Grant, or . . . ."

"Giants," Harry cut her off. "The article is about some giants people saw in Scotland." He finished reading the article, which concluded by quoting locals who insisted that the lads had a few pints too many in the local pub before setting off on their giant-spotting journey. Harry set the newspaper back in the rack and said disgustedly, "The article didn't say anything worthwhile."

Cassie rolled her eyes, "Did you really expect it to? I could have told you that before you picked the paper up."

Harry took back the bag, shaking his head in silent laughter at the theories that the newspaper had advanced about what giants were doing in Scotland. Of course, he had his own theories, none of them really comforting. He took Cassie's hand and they started the walk back to her house. After a few minutes of silence, he said. "What was that you kept muttering about page three?"

She blushed bright red at that point. "Nothing. I just . . ., Well, you know. I kind of figured . . . Oh, forget it, Harry. If you don't know, I don't want to be the one to tell you. Just promise me that you won't ever buy one of those kinds of papers." He didn't promise, but he changed the subject and she didn't press him. The whole way home, she periodically kept chuckling over his reading the article. Harry took her gentle teasing in stride, not trying to justify his interest in giants. He also thought carefully about giants and what their moving through Scotland might mean in the fight against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The fact is that he did not know whether the giants were with Voldemort or against him.

Once they arrived at Cassie's house, Harry unloaded the groceries onto the counter while Cassie set out the recipe, a large bowl, and a flat pan. She then sat down at the nearby kitchen table and smiled angelically at Harry, "I guess I'll just sit over here and watch you prepare my biscuits."

"Oh," mumbled Harry as he looked at the ingredients, bowl, utensils and pan with a look of dismay. He studied the recipe for a second. He tried to look on the bright side of things. It couldn't be as bad as Potions class. Cassie was a lot cuter than Snape and couldn't take any points from him. Or award detention.

After a minute, Cassie laughed and said, "If you have any questions I'll be glad to help." That was also a lot different than Snape. Harry decided to just begin and, to his surprise and relief, he didn't have any major problems. She did need to help him with creaming the butter and sugar. Then there was the rather horrible moment when Harry stuck his finger in the cocoa powder to taste it, expecting a sweet flavor when he licked the finger. Cassie laughed for about five minutes solid until she had to get a drink of water to calm down. She kept saying, "The look on your face, Harry! It was just too funny!" Harry imagined that it was very funny. He hadn't had anything that bitter in a while and it had been a total surprise. That had somehow made it much worse. He didn't mention that the potions he occasionally had to taste or use for one reason or another were actually more bitter but at least he always expected that.

Time passed quickly as he worked through the instructions and before he knew it, the first batch was ready to bake. She helped him set the timer. "All right. We've got about ten minutes but we better keep an eye on them."

Harry sat down at the table across from her. "Are you ready for my surprise now?"

"I guess. Is it a good surprise?"

"Well, I think you'll like it." He proceeded to pull a chess set out of the bag he had with him in the supermarket. He had bought it before going over to the market at a drug store down the street. It was a fairly decent set although the pieces were only plastic. The pieces were heavy which Harry thought would make it easier to play. Cassie watched with interest as he set up the board and pieces, explaining what each of them were as he arranged both hers and his on the board. He was not quite done when the timer went off for the first batch. It took them about ten minutes to remove them to a cooling rack and get the next batch ready to go in. Harry and Cassie both took two biscuits over to the table and then Cassie poured two glasses of milk. Harry had to admit that for a first baking attempt, they turned out very delicious. He continued explaining the way the pieces moved as the next batch cooked. By the time the fourth and final batch was in the oven, they had started a trial game, with Harry playing both black and white, explaining how you can predict and counter moves by your opponent.

The timer for the fourth batch had just gone off, when the front door opened and their little island of solitude was breached by the arrival of the rest of the family. The boys immediately descended into the kitchen like a hoard of crickets descending on a green field of grass. Their mother was two steps behind them, reminding them that it was almost time for dinner. Mrs. Robinson said hello to Harry but then deftly stowed the remaining biscuits into a container. Harry thought she seemed a little upset that they had baked the biscuits so late in the afternoon. He swallowed hard and was about to apologize when Mrs. Robinson smiled, reached down and selected two of the fresh batch for herself. She munched contentedly, complimenting both Harry and Cassie on how good they were before she put a lid on the

container and put it up on the fridge. "When you leave, Harry, be sure to take those with you. You made them, so you deserve to eat them." Cassie and Harry shared a smile. She had mentioned earlier that her mother would probably try to get the biscuits out of the house as soon as possible.

Cassie stood behind Harry and rubbed his back and shoulders, saying, "You did a great job. I can't believe this was your first time baking biscuits." Harry grinned and again assured her he had never baked biscuits before.

He decided that he really should be heading home. He wasn't sure if they would invite him for dinner. Cassie seemed to be about ready to do so when he interrupted her. "Cassie, I've had a great time, but I really better be getting home. I haven't spent as much time there as I should have lately." She accepted that explanation without protest and fifteen minutes later he was standing on her front porch with the container of biscuits, the recipe, and some of the left-over ingredients in a shopping bag. He had the chess set in the bag he had brought it in.

"Would you like to come to my place tomorrow? We could play chess again." He was anxious to get her back to his house now that he knew she could get in without too much difficulty.

Cassie looked at her mother, who nodded approval, and then said, "That sounds great. You're good at it. Do you always win when you play your friend Ron?"

"No. Actually, I lose most of the time, but I'll tell you more about that tomorrow."

"What time shall we get together?"

"How about 10:00 and then we can also have lunch at my place."

"Okay," Cassie nodded. "I'll come over . . . ." She suddenly stopped talking, closed her mouth, opened it again, and said, "I can't believe it. I can see your house in my mind and I can see the paper with your

address on it but I can't remember it. Could you give it to me again and I can just have my mum run me over?"

Harry answered carefully, not wanting to say anything too suspicious. "I'm not surprised you can't remember the address. I'm afraid it wouldn't help to give it to you because neither you nor your mum could find the place." Actually, Harry couldn't tell her the address if he wanted to. He could try, but it wouldn't come out. As he was not the secret keeper for the Fidelius charm, he could not say the address out loud or write it for her. "I'll just come here, pick you up, and we can walk back together."

"My mum has lived around this neighborhood for some time. She could find it, I'm sure." Cassie retorted, a slight hurt creeping into her voice.

"Normally, I'm sure you'd be right but this is rather . . . ."

"Let me guess." Cassie broke in with a smile, "It's rather complicated."

"Well, it is," Harry responded. He didn't try to explain further. "So, shall I come about 10?"

"That sounds good." She then gave a mischievous smile and asked, "So, do I have to get into your house the same way I did last time?" Harry nodded and Cassie said, as she wrapped her arms around Harry, "I guess that won't be so bad." They both laughed and then kissed goodbye and Harry left with Cassie watching from her porch, waving every time he turned back to look at her again.

As Harry walked home, his thoughts ranged from Cassie to giants in Scotland and back to Cassie. He again wondered how much longer he would be in London. He always had a little worry when he left her. He hoped that when Dumbledore sent for him he would at least have time to say goodbye.

## Chapter 29

### Too Many Questions

"Okay, are you ready? Are you thinking of the address?" Harry was facing Cassie and she was smiling as she looked down at the paper with the address.

She nodded and then looked at Harry expectantly, "Now do we get to kiss?"

"Yes, and I think it should be a very long, enjoyable kiss." Her eyes sparkled in response to his teasing.

Cassie stepped in closer to Harry and he bent to meet her upturned face. She always felt so good against him. He could have just held her for a very long time. He let his eyes drift closed for a minute, savoring the feel of her mouth against his. Her arms were trapped between them and she let them slowly slide up around his neck. He could feel the rasp of the parchment she still clutched in her hand against his skin. As they kissed, the quiet pop behind Cassie assured Harry the house had indeed appeared, right on schedule. Harry reluctantly moved back from Cassie. This was a most vulnerable moment. He had to get her into the house quickly so that he could make the house disappear again. Her eyes opened as he grabbed her hand and pulled her quickly to the steps. "Come on. We've got to get inside."

As Harry had expected, he was not able to make a quiet entrance. "Her again!" Harry frantically placed his hand over the doorbell to muffle the sound, but it did very little good. "Why is she back? I don't think Dumbledore would like this." Cassie was looking around the steps with an odd expression, clutching Harry's arm with a slightly nervous grasp. The door had not opened yet, and Harry frantically looked up and down the street to make sure no one else was looking out windows or doors.

"Sir Cadogan. Hurry up." The doorbell hadn't even asked for the password yet, but Harry knew they couldn't afford to stand outside for very long. He raised his voice slightly, hoping that Cassie did not

think he was completely nutters. "We shouldn't be out here in the open like this so open the door now."

The door opened but only a sliver (as though the doorbell begrudged the fact that he had to open it at all) and Harry pushed firmly against it, stepping in first and then helping Cassie into the entrance hall. He stepped up to the door again, slamming it shut. Not, however, before both he and undoubtedly Cassie could clearly hear the words "You need to be more careful. What's the purpose of a Fidel . . . ." He fastened all of the locks quickly, sighing with relief as the last bolt slid home. Then he turned to his guest.

"All right . . . .That was a little strange." She looked confused but not angry and Harry was grateful for that.

"Yeah, well. . . . my life is a little strange. I'm surprised you haven't figured that out yet." Harry tried to interject a little humor into what felt to him like a very serious moment. She smiled, but faintly, and he knew that his effort had failed. He tried to think how he could explain a little but not really tell her anything. His mind, however, refused to cooperate. Usually, he was quick to think up ways to tell half truths. It was a skill he had honed to near perfection at school with his professors but it completely deserted him now. He waited for the blade to fall. What was she going to ask?

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. "Your house . . . .doesn't want me here." Harry thought that this was a fairly astute observation.

"It's not so much that . . . . Um, . . . .Alright. Let's go sit down, okay?" Harry decided that he owed her a little bit of an explanation, at least. His mind was spinning like he was using floo powder and his stomach felt like he had just swallowed a snitch. He dragged out his routine tasks: wand on the table, parchment folded next to it, wallet placed on parchment, quick trip to the bedroom to make sure that Sir Lionel was still snoring. Finally, when there was nothing else to be done, he stepped into the small living room where she was already sitting on the couch, looking at him. Harry tried to read her expression, but he couldn't. He sat down by her, his legs not quite touching hers, and reached for her hand, holding it in both of his.

"As you know, Cassie, I'm . . . in danger. There are people out to hurt me if they can find me." That was true. So far so good. "I'm hiding, basically. And . . . this house is, uh, how I hide. I really can't explain it any better than that."

"But that doesn't make any sense." Harry could see that behind the clear blue eyes, a shadow had formed. He hated it, but he didn't know how he could make it any better. "I still don't know who's chasing you and why. And for some reason your house hates me." Her voice had risen quite distinctly at the end of that sentence and Harry heard quiet anger behind her words.

"Hate is a little bit strong of a word, Cassie."

"Fine, then. It dislikes me strongly. Is that better, Harry? Does that change anything? I think you're just arguing semantics now." Harry had to agree. It was the sure sign of a dead-end argument.

"You're right, Cassie. That was a stupid thing to say. The point is, . . . . Well, the point is, that you said you understood about secrets and everything, and then you said that . . . ." He couldn't say it. He just couldn't bring himself to have to remind her of those wonderful words she had said to him that night at the cinema. She had said she would take what she could get. That she wanted to be with him. That she liked him, secrets and all. "Maybe you've changed your mind, Cassie?"

"Changed my mind about what?" She stood up and walked away from him, staring out the front window at the street. There was tension in every line of her body.

"About. . . ." He couldn't say it. He just couldn't. But he had to. "You said that as long as I didn't lie to you that you would understand if I couldn't tell you things." There was a long moment of silence.

"Yes. I did. Didn't I?" She turned around and looked at him. He forced himself to meet her eyes. "I just didn't expect . . . . Well. I don't know what I expected. Just, not this!" She indicated the front door with her hand, and Harry felt the exasperation suddenly leave her. "I guess I'm being a little stupid, aren't I?" There was another long pause. Harry



said nothing. Then, finally, "I meant what I said, Harry. Are you lying to me now?"

"No."

"Well then, I guess I just really . . ." She quieted, biting her lower lip as she thought hard about the situation.

"Cassie." He was surprised at how thick his voice sounded. He cleared his throat. "Cassie. I want you here, very badly. Please stay. Don't be angry about the stupid door. It's not important." He let his voice change to a lighter tone. " Besides, you owe me a game of chess. You promised that we could play today." Somehow, those words evaporated most of the tension in the room and she laughed, quietly but sincerely and Harry felt the little snitch in his stomach quiet down. It was going to be okay. For now.

"Oh, that's it, isn't it? You just want to beat me badly to make up for the other night and the night before that." He stood up and walked over to her. He put his arms around her tentatively. She leaned into him the way that he liked so much. And he kissed her then. Beating her at chess moved to the back of his mind for quite a long time.

When they finally did get around to playing chess, Cassie learned quickly and Harry found the game very enjoyable. He loved playing wizard chess even though he almost always lost. Sometimes Ginny and he teamed up against Ron and then he could win. Hermione was fairly hopeless and when he and she teamed up, they usually lost worse than when it was just Harry. Added to that was the fact that his pieces didn't respect him and constantly argued with him when he went to make a move. But he decided, after a while of playing regular Muggle chess against Cassie, some of their harping must have rubbed off. He was making some good moves and he did not think it was just because she was so inexperienced. He beat her thoroughly very quickly in the first game and she was willing to play a second. She was, he had to admit, a very good sport. She seemed eager to learn and made some good strategic defensive moves a few times. He did get her into checkmate, though, by tricking her into paying attention to some other pieces on the board while he moved in for the kill.

"Chess is primarily a game of strategy, Cassie." Harry explained this as she questioned how he had managed to do this without her noticing. "A good player will draw your attention away from the pieces he really is using to win. That way, you are worrying about things that have nothing to do with the actual endgame. And, before you know it, you're in checkmate. You have to consider all the options. Never move rashly. That gets you into trouble every time."

"Maybe we can play again later, Harry. My head feels like it's going to explode with too many deep thoughts." She was sitting on the floor by his feet as he put away the board and pieces. The coffee table had proved to be a good playing surface although Harry thought maybe next time they would play in the kitchen where they could sit in chairs rather than on the floor. His back hurt a bit. Then suddenly, "I'm starving. I thought that you were going to feed me at some point."

Harry was amazed when he looked at the clock and realized it was 12:30. The time he had spent with her today had simply flown by. Of course it always did. He enjoyed being with her so much that time passed unmarked. He stood up, carrying the chess set over to the desk. "I didn't really plan anything fancy. I just thought we could have sandwiches."

"That sounds good. Do you have wheat bread?"

"You are obsessed, Cassie. Absolutely obsessed. Yes, I have wheat bread. I got it just for you."

They laughed a lot over the next half hour as they assembled their respective sandwiches. Harry kept trying to slip more mayonnaise onto her bread and she kept trying to remove the cheese he was insisting on slicing for his sandwich. She liked mustard. He didn't. He liked pickles. She didn't. He pulled out a bag of crisps, half expecting to get yelled at for it. But she just grinned guiltily and grabbed a handful to put on her plate. He raised an eyebrow with a silent question which she pretended she had not caught. "My favorite," she muttered a few minutes later as she bit into her first salt and vinegar crisp. "You are a wicked person. I could have resisted anything else you bought." Harry didn't answer, just letting the other eyebrow join

its partner, trying very hard not to burst out laughing. They also had fruit salad from a can to round out the meal. Harry finished his food first even though his sandwich had been much bigger than Cassie's to start with. She ate carefully, chewing each bite and finishing one food before moving to another. Harry leaned back in his chair and watched her, enjoying the way she looked in his kitchen. She was wearing khaki shorts and a dark blue shirt that really brought out the color of her eyes. Her blond hair was pulled back into a pony tail, and, as usual, her makeup was subtle.

Cassie felt his eyes on her and flushed a light pink under his scrutiny. "What? Do I have something on my face?"

"No." He didn't elaborate. She flushed a deeper shade of pink, wiping self consciously at her face after a minute.

"What? Am I doing something wrong?"

"No." This was fun. He was enjoying seeing her try to figure out what he was looking at. After another minute of his careful scrutiny, she stood up suddenly and came over to his side of the table.

"Harry James Evans. Stop staring at me." Then she bent down and kissed him. Yeah, that did it. His eyes closed during the kiss and he lost all interest in teasing her. She finished her lunch quickly after that and Harry started cleaning up the few dishes they had dirtied.

"So, what did you want to do this afternoon, Cassie?" Harry was used to one game of chess with Ron taking several hours and had not thought of any alternate activities for afterward. He hoped that she did not want to go home yet. He wasn't ready to say good-bye.

"Well, Harry. I have to say that we bought that VCR for you and I went to all the trouble to come over here and hook it up for you and you haven't used it once."

"Oh, well . . . ." Harry felt terrible. He had full intentions of using it but hadn't had a chance to stop by and pick any movies up. He thought that it would probably take him a while to decide on a movie and he just had been spending all of his time with a certain blonde girl who

distracted him quite a lot. "I just . . . ." He sincerely hoped that she did not want to go out and get movies this afternoon. Going through the whole process of getting into his house again today was just going to be too much trouble. He was prepared to tell her this when she shocked him.

"I brought a movie that I really love and I thought you would like also." Harry was very surprised. That was about the last thing he expected her to say.

"What is it?"

"It's about dragons." Harry felt all the color drain out of his face. Dragons. He hated dragons. What had made her think that he would like a movie about them? She continued, not noticing his expression. "You seem to like that kind of old-fashioned stuff. This is kind of an old-fashioned movie. You know, knights and dragons and evil princes and all that sort of stuff." She pulled it out of her bag. "It's called Dragonheart."

"Oh." Harry blinked. Okay. If she thought so. How bad could it be? She found the remote and the batteries he had bought which he never had bothered to take out of the package. She tried out the remote by turning the power on to the VCR and Harry was pleased that it actually worked. She walked over to the television and slipped the movie in.

"I hope you like it. It's very good, I think." Without talking much about it, they settled themselves on the couch in a position that Harry found exceedingly comfortable. He was leaning back against one of the arm rests, facing the television, his left leg stretching along the length of the couch, his right foot on the floor. Cassie was sitting against him in the natural V formed by his position, her back against his chest, both her legs stretched out next to his left one. His arms were around her waist, his chin resting on the top of her head. She smelled nice, but something was different.

"Your hair smells different." She turned her face back toward him.

"What?"

Harry blushed bright red. He really hadn't meant to say that. The fresh-sunshine smell of her hair was one of the things he loved about her, but he had never told her that. "Um, your hair usually . . . ." He really didn't know how to describe what he wanted to say. "I mean, usually it smells kind of, uh, outdoorsy."

"Oh.." Cassie flushed a little, too. "I had to use a different shampoo than usual today."

"I like it, but I think I like the other better." Harry couldn't believe he had just said that. What shampoo she used really wasn't any of his business. She didn't complain, though. She just smiled and snuggled closer against Harry's chest. His arms tightened around her for a brief moment.

The movie started but after about 20 minutes, Harry lost all interest in it. He tried very hard to think back to his pre-wizarding days -- the days when he thought he was just an average boy whose parents had been killed in an auto accident. Did he think dragons were all noble and good and brave? Did he think they were friendly? He didn't remember. He knew better now, anyway. He said nothing, of course, because Cassie seemed to really be enjoying it, gasping at the exciting parts and muttering comments about how brave everyone was. So instead of watching the movie and laughing out loud at the ridiculous portrayal of dragons, he watched her. She constantly surprised him. Just when he thought he had figured her out, she surprised him again, today being a good example of that. He relaxed and enjoyed this time of holding her. Halfway through the movie, though, he decided that he had better get up. He was starting to fall asleep.

"Uh, Cassie. I think I'll make us some popcorn and get something to drink. Any preferences?"

"Do you have any of the biscuits left over from yesterday?"

"Of course. Did you think I could have eaten all two dozen by myself overnight?" She didn't answer and he went into the kitchen. It took about twenty minutes to get everything ready. By then, he missed her

and decided that it would be faster if he carried everything out at once. He was anxious to sit back down behind her and hold her. He carefully balanced the popcorn bowl and the plate of biscuits in one hand, holding the two glasses of soda in the other hand, walking across the hall. Just as he arrived, Cassie made a comment as some dramatic moment happened in the movie.

"Oh, Harry. Isn't he wonderful? He is so willing to sacrifice himself for . . ."

Harry snorted, trying hard not to laugh. He might drop something. Darn, it was starting to slip now quite badly. He shifted his arms, paying close attention to the plate as it was trying to slide off again. "Dragons are just not that noble. Let me tell you. They're mean and nasty. And they don't talk - they especially don't speak English." He reached the table without major mishap and put down his burden. He straightened and met her wide blue eyes. Oh. No. Had he just said that? Out loud? To her? His eyes widened and met hers. He needed to start bluffing and bluffing fast.

"Harry, when you say things like that, I don't know whether to laugh or be very scared."

He forced out a laugh and even to his ears it sounded meager and forced - heh, heh . . . heh, heh... After a second, he stopped. Somehow that made it worse.

"All right, then. I vote for very very scared." She let the subject drop for the and turned back to the movie, leaning forward so he could slide back behind her. Once he was settled, he reached over and pulled the bowl of popcorn onto her lap.

He said nothing. She did not bring the subject up again. But somehow, he knew she had not forgotten the comment. He munched the popcorn mechanically, watching the end of the movie, almost dreading to see what happened at the end. It was as bad as he feared. When the dragon died and went to be with his other dragon ancestors in the stars, Harry practically choked on his mouthful of soda. The constellation of dragon stars was called, of course, Draco. What a reminder!!! Could he never get away from that name? In his

arms, Cassie sighed, a deep romantic sort of sigh, and leaned back against his chest. Obviously, she had loved the movie and had been able to discount his stupid comments about it. He rolled his eyes above her head and tightened his arms around her waist. She stopped the movie and started rewinding it with the remote. Then she straightened up from him and stood up. "Well, I guess I better get ready to go, Harry. I told my mum I'd be home early today. I think she's a little nervous about . . . uh, about . . . She needs help with something." Harry was curious what Cassie's mum was nervous about. He asked but Cassie ignored the question, saying that she had to go into the bathroom to wash up because her hands were all greasy from the popcorn. Harry let her go, stepping in to the kitchen to put the leftovers away and tidy up a little. About a second later, he heard her call him. She sounded worried.

Harry stepped into the hall just as she emerged from the door to the bathroom. "Harry. There's . . . In your room. It . . . Well, it sounds like someone is calling your name."

"What? There's no one . . ." Oh, no. Not now. Not right now. Sir Lionel. Harry gasped and strode past Cassie. "Hang on. Let me see." He opened his bedroom door just enough to slide in and then he firmly shut it and locked it behind him. Sure enough. Sir Lionel, still facing the wall, was calling his name loudly.

Harry strode over to the painting quickly, flipping it over. "Quiet, Sir Lionel. Quiet! Do you have to yell?"

The knight pulled himself up to his full height in the painting and straightened his hat. "I must say. I find myself suddenly facing a blank wall. No idea where I am. No idea where you are. Important message to deliver. What else shall I do but call to you?"

"Sorry, Sir Lionel. I checked on you a while ago. I thought you were still asleep." Harry groaned to himself. Did this have to happen now? Harry considered telling Lionel that he would talk to him later but he had said that there was an important message. Maybe he would be quick. "What's going on, then?"

"Dumbledore has a message he wishes me to convey." Oh, for heaven's sake. Of course Dumbledore had a message. Why else would he have sent Sir Lionel? Okay. Okay. Deep breaths. Harry smiled encouragingly hoping that the knight would say his little bit and leave again.

"Dumbledore wishes me to tell you that if you should hear any rumors from the wizarding world you should not worry. Everything is going as planned and Dumbledore will soon be sending for you." Sir Lionel again cleared his throat importantly and announced, "That is all."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. He had said absolutely nothing new. He had risked Cassie finding out about Sir Lionel just to be told to ignore any rumors from the wizarding world? And that made no sense, anyway. "How," Harry asked, trying hard to keep his voice even, "would I hear any rumors from the wizarding world when I am surrounded by Muggles and can only get Muggle news? It's not like I'm getting owls from all my friends, you know." This whole thing had just been a big waste of time.

"Well now," Lionel looked uncomfortable and fidgeted a little, "I really don't know, do I? I just tell you what I'm told. But I guess Dumbledore thought you might have ways of hearing gossip from witches and wizards here in London." Harry shook his head -- obviously Lionel did not have a clue how completely isolated he had to keep himself. Maybe Dumbledore had not told him. The knight continued. "I do know he seemed quite concerned you should not worry. But in fact, I really don't know why he didn't want you to know . . . since you have already sent messages to him about the Ministry."

Harry looked at Sir Lionel more carefully and asked, "What about the Ministry?"

"Well," Lionel began conspiratorially, "I've heard from some of the other paintings that everything is in complete chaos at the Ministry of Magic. Cornelius Fudge is frightened. All the signs indicate the Ministry will be attacked any day by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. He feels like Voldemort will be trying to kill him personally. Fudge has all of the Aurors on twenty-four hour shifts guarding the place. It's basically locked down. They have even gone so far as to charm all of



the frames around paintings at the Ministry buildings so no one can go in and out of their pictures. That's how I have come to know of it. There are lots of the old headmasters that are quite put out at being stuck in only one frame. Dumbledore is having to keep their spirits up as best he can. "

Now that was interesting information. Not about the paintings, but about Fudge being so worried. And, of course, as usual Dumbledore was trying to protect him from bad news. Harry hoped that one day people would judge him old enough to be told the truth to begin with. But no matter, it was significant to hear that the Ministry was in such a state of turmoil and the Aurors were preparing to be attacked. He could only imagine how Fudge was taking it all. He had been so unwilling to believe that Voldemort was back the year before but now saw him around every corner. Harry almost smiled at the thought but the seriousness of the situation kept him from doing so. He sat silently for a minute, trying to think what all this could mean for him.

Suddenly, he jumped. There was a knock at the door. Harry had completely forgotten about Cassie. He couldn't believe it. Then she called out to him, her voice sounding slightly nervous through the barrier. "Are you all right in there? Harry? What's going on? Please open the door."

Sir Lionel turned toward the door. "Who is that?"

"No one." Harry almost screamed in frustration. It was sure to get back to Dumbledore that he had someone in the house with him if he made a big deal about it. He wasn't sure what Dumbledore would do, and he really, really did not want to find out. He tried to look casual.

Sir Lionel smiled broadly. "I'm glad you've met a friend. I understand completely. I was young once . . . several centuries ago. I remember one time, there was this really lovely young witch who came out to see . . . ." Harry stood, and resolutely flipped the painting back around toward the wall. Sir Lionel was still muttering, but it was harder to hear. There really wasn't much to be done, now, to fix things.

Harry waited a moment, taking a deep breath to calm himself, and then he opened the door and slipped out into the hall where Cassie was waiting. He shut the door behind him, grabbed her arm, and steered her out into the living room again. The look on her face was rather difficult to describe. She was concerned, obviously, but she seemed angry about something, also.

"What's going on, Harry? Who's in there?" She was talking quite loudly and Harry was sure that if Sir Lionel hadn't already left to go pass on the news to Dumbledore, he would hear her. Great. Could things be going any worse?

"No one." Stupid answer. It hadn't worked for Sir Lionel and it certainly did not work for Cassie. Her eyes narrowed in that way that Harry knew meant she was upset and he steeled himself for a tirade.

"So you were in there just talking to yourself - in two different voices? I distinctly heard someone else in there. So don't lie to me. Tell me who it was." Harry gulped. He had absolutely no idea how he was going to get out of this.

## Chapter 30

### Too Few Answers

"I'm waiting." Her hands were on her hips, elbows pointing outward. Every line of her body screamed. She was angry. Harry had never seen her like that before. He swallowed hard again and tried to think of something calming he could say to her.

"Cassie . . . ."

"Don't you dare even think about lying to me, Harry Evans."

"I'm not going to. I can tell you honestly that there is nobody else in that room." He expected her to be mollified, to get one of her looks on her face, and then to hug him. That's what he expected, what he hoped. That's not what happened.

"I'm leaving now, Harry." Her voice was cold, empty, and Harry truly did not think he had ever heard anything so terrible in his life. And he knew terrible.

"Don't go . . . I . . . .I'm being honest with you." He tried one of his smiles - the ones that she seemed to like best. It didn't help.

"No. I am leaving. I'm tired of it. No, I'm sick of it! I can't believe what an idiot I've been!" Harry's eyes widened slightly. He had never heard her talk like this, ever.

"You haven't been an idiot, you've been . . . ."

"No, I think idiot pretty well covers it, Harry! I can't believe I've put up with it all this time!"

"Put up with what?" Harry was trying to figure out exactly what she was upset about but she wasn't going to be dissuaded.

Her hands started gesturing around the living room, the house, rather frantically, her voice high now and agitated. "What are you talking

about? This!! This . . . well, everything! It's too much, Harry. It's just too much!"

"Look, I can show you my bedroom . . . ." Harry hoped to get back to the main issue of who he was talking to, not wanting to let things spread to just his general strangeness, but she had made up her mind.

"No. You don't need to. I know exactly what I would see if you opened that door right now, Harry. Exactly. There is no one else in there. I am positive of that."

"Then . . . ." He was genuinely unsure of what the problem was. He had a feeling that things were way out of his control now and he couldn't get them back.

Her voice was cold again, the calm she had lost a little earlier returning. "There are many ways to lie, Harry. Many, many ways. Do you know that some people can lie to you without saying a word? You've perfected that method. Other people can lie by only telling you partial truths. That's one you've gotten down to a science as well. And do you know that some people can lie by looking you in the face, telling you the honest truth, and not telling you anything at all!? And that, Harry Evans, is the one that you are truly a master of!!" Her breath caught, and Harry thought that she was close to tears. But she pushed them back. "You. Have. Been. Lying. To. Me. Since. I. Met. You." Her words were calm and measured, each one almost a curse. He put up his hand but it could not stop the torrent of words that she was unleashing. "You - Oh, there have been a few moments, a few unguarded moments, when . . . . I almost . . .when I almost saw you, Harry. Almost. But you know what? Your shield would come up again, and then . . . .I was out, pushed away again."

"How can you say that? It's not true, Cassie. I've tried to . . . . We've been close. I've been closer to you than anyone." Harry could feel anger rising up in him. She didn't understand what sort of risks he had taken for her, what sort of chances he had taken.

"I know. And you know what? That makes it worse! Because . . . ."

Again the little hitch in her voice. "Because maybe, maybe there

would have been something really . . . special, if you could have . . . If I had . . . Oh, never mind. It's obvious that you just can't, really can't, be honest with me." She turned away from him then, the anger gone from her suddenly, drained out of her like a plug had been removed, and she was defeated, utterly and completely defeated.

"You know what, Cassie? You're right. You are so completely right." Harry's anger left him as suddenly as hers. Now, he just felt empty inside, too. "And you know what the worst thing about it is, Cassie, that absolute worst?" She shook her head slowly. "The worst thing is that even if I were to sit down and tell you everything I could, it wouldn't help. It wouldn't help at all." He walked over to the door, picked up his wand through sheer habit along with the scrap of parchment, and started opening the locks, turning them one by one, mechanically. He felt her come up behind him, and as the last one slid open, he grabbed her elbow and steered her rather quickly down the steps. She pulled her arm away at the bottom of the stairs and moved away from him. Harry had heard the stupid doorbell start ranting again, but she had not even looked in that direction, and he supposed that she was past caring about strange voices being where they shouldn't be.

Finally, she spoke again, calmly. "Please don't walk me home, Harry. I'll be fine. You just go back into the house and . . ." She moved to turn then, to indicate his steps, ones that Harry knew were no longer visible. He grabbed her arm again and pulled her down the street, wanting to distract her, wondering if it was worth the effort.

"I am walking you home, Cassie."

"No." She stopped and refused to take another step next to him. "I know exactly how this will go. You'll have all the walk home to think of some story that you can tell me, something to make things better. You'll tell me. I'll give in. This whole stupid cycle will start all over again, and once again, I'll be an idiot. I don't want you to come home with me. I really don't."

Harry decided that the time for polite platitudes was past. "I will walk you home, Cassie. There are things out here that could hurt you, badly, and I will not have you hurt on my account. Let's go. I won't be

thinking up any more lies to tell you. I won't say a word the whole way, if you like." They set off down the familiar street, somehow distant and alien now, and Harry was surprised when he had to squint at the reflection of the sun on glass. Its brightness seemed out of place in the cold gray of the afternoon.

Neither of them said a word for almost 25 minutes. They did not touch. His mood alternated between anger and hurt. He knew that she would have no way of knowing what he had risked for her. But still, . . . Well, still. They had walked in silence before, of course, but usually they were holding hands and usually Harry found the quiet peaceful and calming, a way of being together when words were not enough. Today, the quiet was as flat as glass and he feared that if he tried to speak it would shatter and cut him. He was not sure he would ever heal from a wound that deep. He wasn't sure he would want to. As they got to her house, she sobbed and without saying anything else, she ran the last few feet to her front steps and then she was up them and then she was gone. And Harry felt like crying himself, out there on her front porch, all the grief and pain and loneliness he felt welling into his throat.

But, years of training in hiding his pain asserted themselves, and he turned from her house resolutely, knowing that he had a destiny he had to face in the next few days and it didn't change reality - his reality. Something she would never understand. He wished he was as lucky.

The walk to his house was plenty long for him to get really mad. Did she think that he liked living like this, not being able to tell her anything about himself? Did she think that he loved having a constant knot at the bottom of his stomach from the fear that he would say something wrong? He would love to be able to talk to her about everything in his life but that just wasn't possible. And if she wasn't satisfied with it than she had only herself to blame. After all, she had said, come right out and said, that she didn't mind if he didn't tell her things - that he could keep his secrets. Apparently she had been lying then, or something. It wasn't really fair for her to change the rules in the middle of things, was it?

By the time, he had gotten home, he had worked himself up into a righteous fit of anger. As he stomped up the steps he practically screamed the password at the doorbell which, perhaps sensing that it might be smashed if it dared to comment, just opened the door and let Harry inside. Harry slammed the door with more force than usual and that was really saying something. With every one of the six locks that he slammed home, he let a good curse word or two out and by the time his house was safely invisible again, he also felt a lot better. Sometimes, he thought, as he leaned back against the door in exhaustion, it was good to live alone. There was no one to glare at him for the colorful language he had just let loose.

He slammed his wand onto the hall table with more force than necessary and it was a testament to the magical properties of the house that the table just didn't collapse completely. He stalked into the living room, throwing himself onto the couch. He sat there for about 15 minutes feeling very angry and letting all the frustration roil around in his brain. It felt good to be so mad at her. Then his stomach growled and all the other feelings his anger had pushed to the side were suddenly screaming for his attention.

Harry could not have possibly identified each one of these feelings, even if he had been able to sort them all out into individual emotions. It was all just a big jumble which made his temples pound and his stomach feel queasy. He could, however, recognize a few familiar faces amidst that mass of confusion. There was sadness, frustration, uncertainty. Then there was one that Harry was all too familiar with - one he tried to shove back again into oblivion. He didn't really want to reacquaint himself with it now. Loneliness.

He pushed himself off the couch and stalked into the kitchen, hoping that anger would reassert itself and let those other little feelings get pushed to the back of his mind again. It didn't. They stayed. Harry ate dinner mechanically, not really tasting any of the food and finally throwing away half of the soup he had heated. He tried to distract himself by watching television. It was only at that point that he realized Cassie had forgotten her video. In her rush to leave his house and him, she had left it in the VCR. Great. He took it out, shoved it into the cardboard sleeve and carried it into the hall where

he put it down by his other things. He would have to return it to her; obviously she was the one who had a thing for dragons.

He had a horrible thought about 8 o'clock and went tearing into his bedroom to flip the painting of Sir Lionel around. He shook the frame briskly and called loudly to the old knight who was once again sleeping soundly on his little stool "Sir Lionel, Sir Lionel!"

"What? What? My goodness. We spoke just a few minutes ago, didn't we?"

"Well, yes. (Harry had noticed that the old man seemed to have only a vague concept of time passing.) But I was wondering . . . I was . . . I mean, what did you tell Dumbledore about, uh, me?"

"I told him the truth, Harry, of course."

Harry's stomach sank to his feet. He might as well start packing.  
"Oh."

"I told him you were well and happy and that you weren't going to listen to any rumors. Was there something else I was supposed to tell him? I didn't think you had specified any message."

He must have forgotten all about the "girl" rattling the doorknob and Harry certainly was not going to remind him about the disaster of the afternoon. He just thanked the painting once again for his good work and left the bedroom, this time leaving it facing away from the wall, feeling like that was the least he could do for the old knight.

Harry tried to go to bed early that night, but just lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. Before he had come here, he almost never slept well. He either had horrible nightmares which caused him to wake up screaming or his scar hurt so unbearably that sleep eluded him. There were times when he would go several nights in a row without really ever sleeping deeply, and at times like that he would be forced by his friends or Dumbledore to take one of Madam Pomfrey's sleeping potions but even then he never felt rested. Since he had come here though, he had slept well almost every night. He had had a few strange dreams, but this was so normal for him, that he



supposed it would have been more of a concern if he hadn't had any. It was strange, then, to lie awake hour after hour again, the whole horrible afternoon scene replaying in his brain constantly.

The next morning as he pulled his achy body out of bed and rubbed eyes that felt like they had been through a desert sandstorm. Harry's mixed-up muddle of emotions had resolved themselves to a simple feeling of depression. He missed her horribly. He had decided about 3 a.m. that maybe it was really better this way, that if they finished things now he wouldn't have to miss her so badly once Dumbledore came and got him. And it was obvious that she wasn't going to miss him. Maybe she would never even know he was gone. Harry knew, though, that it might be easier on her but nothing was going to make things simple for him.

The morning passed and Harry spent it imaging all sorts of scenarios that could occur if he were to see her again. The first one was the one that he found most amusing, and the one that he revisited several different times to see if it ever ended better. It went something like this:

"All right, Cassie. You are so dead set on my telling you the truth. Here it is. I'm a wizard. I go to a wizard school where we learn really great stuff like how to take care of Hippogriffs, how to transfigure rats into water goblets, banishing charms, and the ever popular defense against someone who is trying to cast an unforgivable curse on you. Yeah, you know that stick I carry around? It's actually a magic wand and I can do all sorts of things with it like open locked doors and turn your hair different colors. Oh, yeah. And I fly on a broom, too."

This scenario always ended in Harry's brain with Cassie calling up the police who hauled him to the local mental hospital. Another scenario that he had imagined was a lot more satisfying, if just as unrealistic. This involved Cassie throwing herself at him and begging forgiveness, insisting that she never wanted to ask him any more questions, and when he wanted to at least apologize for making her mad, kissing him senseless until he forgot about such a silly idea.

Other scenes that he thought were probably more realistic involved his trying to explain a little bit to her about why he couldn't tell her

anything and having her slam the door in his face, saying that she never wanted to see him again. He didn't like that at all, but he knew that it was the one most likely to actually occur. Or maybe she wouldn't even come to the door, maybe her mother would be the one to tell him that he could never come back. Or maybe her dad would show up at the door holding a very long shotgun, explaining to Harry that his friends wouldn't be able to find enough pieces of him to bury if he ever stepped foot on their porch again. That latest thought made Harry pretty nervous. He didn't know how wizards reacted to being shot, but it didn't really matter, did it? Dead was still dead.

Harry did a lot of pacing that morning, skulking from room to room in the small house, unable to find anything to keep his mind occupied. He did write his usual brief note to Dumbledore and for a few moments even considered telling the headmaster all of his troubles. He decided against it. Why get himself in trouble now that there was probably nothing to tell. He had yet to take this letter out to the post box. He thought that maybe he would take the video back at the same time and he just was not ready to face her, not until he settled on a firm idea of what he was going to do.

If it was just a matter of his own safety at stake, Harry thought. he probably would have confessed everything a long time ago. He got nervous at the thought of Voldemort but wasn't ever really frightened for himself. Of course, things were more complicated than that. They always were, weren't they? Getting rid of Voldemort would mean more than just killing one really bad guy. It would mean saving the lives of maybe thousands of wizards and Muggles who Voldemort would then not have a chance to kill. And, of more immediate concern, Harry did not know Dumbledore's plan for this battle and if Harry compromised the secrecy that seemed so vital to its success, he might cost lives of those Dumbledore had recruited to fight. Maybe even some of his very close friends. How could he live with himself if that was what happened? Just so he could be with a girl? No, it just wasn't worth the risk.

What he did come to realize that morning was that short of confessing everything to her, Harry would do just about anything to be with her again. He was astonished at the hole left in his life now that she was gone. He wanted her back. So, gathering his wand, his

letter, the videotape, and -- from somewhere in the depths of his gut -  
- his courage, he left the house, determined to talk to her and convince her to give their relationship another chance.

He walked quickly for the first part of the trip. But, he got more and more nervous as he approached her house, and by the time he got to her actual street, he could hardly force himself forward. What if she really never wanted anything to do with him again? The three steps that led up to her porch seemed to have multiplied to 100 and Harry could barely pull himself up them. The feeling that he should just run back to the cocoon of his invisible house and hide was overwhelming him. But, he had never been fond of cocoons. And, he had been sorted into Gryffindor. Gathering the last remains of his determination, then, he knocked on Cassie's front door.

## Chapter 31

### A Surprising Visit

It seemed like an hour before the door swung open and Harry looked down into Matthew's face. He felt a little better when the boy smiled openly and warmly. At least the whole family didn't hate him.

"Hi, Matthew. Is Cassie here?"

"Yeah. I don't think she knew you were coming, though. She hasn't been mooning around here like she usually does."

Harry flushed a little. "No, this is kind of a surprise visit." Matthew moved aside to let Harry into the house and Harry immediately realized that he was the one surprised.

"Excuse the suitcases and things. We're all going on a trip tomorrow and we just found out so we've got a lot to do."

"A trip?" He could barely get the words out. They seemed to have gotten caught partway up his throat. "Where are you going?" Harry was positive that Cassie had not mentioned going on any sort of trip. The nervous feeling he had had all morning suddenly multiplied into downright panic. She was leaving? Going away? He wanted to pelt Matthew with a million questions but suddenly,

"Matthew! Where have you gotten to? You've got to get your clothes packed now, young man!"

"Coming, coming. Jeesh, didn't you hear the knocking?" His voice was irritable as he wandered toward his mother, who was obviously calling from a back bedroom. He turned as he was leaving the entry hall, "Well, come on. Mum'll be glad to have help." Harry followed woodenly into the family room where it looked like every closet in the house had exploded, spilling their contents in bright bombs of color. There were multiple suitcases in the room, most open and obviously in the middle of being packed. Harry could barely think. She was leaving! Leaving without saying goodbye! All the anger Harry had felt the day before came flooding back, only to be quickly banished by a

feeling of such acute emptiness that he caught his breath at the pain of it. Old wounds, thought long healed, were suddenly ripped open, exposing nerve endings that throbbed and screamed in agony. He couldn't bear it. No, he simply couldn't bear it. He could not go through this again. He bit his lip to hold back what felt suspiciously like a sob in the back of his throat.

Then he straightened his spine and squared his shoulders. He may not be the best at handling emotional outbursts from other people but he was very good at suppressing them in himself. He almost never cried and he wasn't going to now. He heard footsteps behind him and turned. Mrs. Robinson smiled a wan smile at him. Harry thought she looked exhausted. "Matthew said you were here but I thought he was just trying to get Cassie all riled up. We weren't expecting you today." Obviously, he thought. He didn't say it. It wasn't her fault that everything had gone so terribly wrong.

She crossed the room to a suitcase, where she put the pile of clothes she had been holding in her arms. She pushed her hair back from her forehead and at that moment, Harry was reminded forcefully of Cassie. She did that when she was tired. He stirred himself from the dark thoughts he was having.

"Matthew mentioned you need some help?" He tried to sound cheerful, like he knew all about the trip and didn't mind that they would be taking his heart with them.

"Oh, yes. I would love it. But I think Cassie will probably want to talk to you first. She really wanted to reach you earlier today but couldn't . . . ." Just then, Harry heard a soft little catch of breath behind him and turned to face Cassie who had just entered the room. She had another armful of clothes and had obviously not expected to find him here.

He wanted to hug her but she had too much stuff in her arms. And truthfully, he wasn't sure that she would welcome his touching her at all. The words they had said to each other the afternoon before had made him unsure of exactly what their relationship was; and the fact that she was leaving made the situation even more confusing. He just stared at her as she walked over to her mother and put the clothes

down with the others. Mrs. Robinson smiled at Harry again and left the room. Cassie started folding the clothes into very small little bundles and packing them into the suitcase. She seemed agitated and her hands were shaking slightly as they moved automatically through the small pile.

"Harry, I'm . . . I wanted to call earlier today and tell you . . . but you still haven't given me your phone number and I didn't have time to walk over there. Mum was going to drive me this afternoon. I thought I could find the house even though I can't recall the numbers exactly. It's weird, I can never remember your address." Harry wasn't sure what the point of that tidbit of information was. Was she trying to accuse him of once again withholding things from her? He felt a brief flare of frustration. He thought that maybe she was right -- this was never going to work out.

She finally stopped folding the clothes and walked over to him where he still stood in the middle of the room. He was still standing where he had stopped on first entering the room, unsure of what was going on. He thought that maybe he should try to move his feet now. They seemed strangely disconnected from the rest of him and he wasn't sure that they would obey him anyway.

Cassie stood about a foot away from him and looked searchingly up into his face. He thought he saw relief there as well as a little bit of guilt, maybe some nervousness. He could not really read her well enough to be able to decipher her mood. He knew she wasn't angry anymore - if that had truly been how she had felt the day before. She did seem a little sad, a little distant, more hesitant than Harry had ever seen her. She always seemed to move through his life with such single-minded determination. This was a side to her that he was not familiar with - a fact that threw him even more off kilter than he already was.

He lifted his arm, indicating the barely organized chaos around the room. "When were you going to tell me about this?"

"What? Oh, well. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually. I needed to . . . ."

The message to move seemed to have gotten through to his feet finally and he took a step toward her, only to have her back up, seemingly not wanting to get too much into his personal space. Or not let him get too much into hers.

"My dad got a phone call last night. He has to fill in for a sick colleague at some really boring meeting. The only good thing is that it is in France and the whole family can go."

"When?" Harry wanted to ask more, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Just last night. I told you."

"No. I mean when are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. But that's actually what I wanted to . . . ."

Just then, Mrs. Robinson stepped into the room again. "Got everything settled?" Settled? Harry thought. How could they get this settled? She continued, "Is that all right then?" She must have seen the look of utter confusion on his face because she looked at Cassie. "You haven't told him yet?" A small shake of the head and then Harry was really puzzled. The pertinent facts seem to have all been covered. Of course, there was the fact that he thought he might implode from loneliness, but he doubted that it what she meant.

"Look, Harry. What I've been trying to tell you, is . . . ." She looked imploringly at her mother. Mrs. Robinson smiled.

"What she is trying to say, Harry, is that despite the potential thrill of spending an entire week in the exciting company of her parents and her two sweet younger brothers, Cassie has declined the offer of a free vacation in France." Harry's heart stopped completely. It restarted again, doing double time, when Mrs. Robinson finished by saying, "She thought that she had something more interesting she could be doing here - I know I can't imagine what it is." She laughed, a warm friendly laugh that again reminded Harry very much of her daughter's. They may not look anything alike, but they certainly did have the same laugh, one that Harry still thought he would follow to the gates of hell if it meant he could hear it just one more time.

"Anyway, I'm sure you two will have a much better time here together than either of you would have with Cassie in France. But . . ." She took a deep breath and looked directly into Harry's face. " . . . I expect that you will continue to behave in a responsible way. I have been very impressed at the way you have treated my daughter and if I had any thoughts that such behavior would not continue I can assure you that she would not be allowed to stay - no matter how much of a tantrum she threw." Harry heard an embarrassed squeal from Cassie. He flushed bright pink. He had never been told in such clear terms that he better keep himself in line. Not that he had any intentions of doing otherwise, but it was still embarrassing to be so bluntly put in his place.

The next couple of hours reminded Harry very much of the last day of summers he had spent at the Burrow when the Weasleys, he and Hermione were trying to pack to get ready to go back to school. Everyone was hustling around trying to make sure nothing was forgotten, laundry was being done and sorted, Mrs. Robinson was bustling about busily trying to make sure that the boys had packed enough socks and underwear. Harry helped out as much as he could. He was so busy he did not have much of a chance to visit with Cassie who continued to hurry from one room to another on various errands for her mother. Every so often her mother would remind Cassie of something else she wanted her to do while they were away. Cassie would dutifully add it to an ever-growing list.

Slowly they were making order out of the chaos in the family room. As with any other last- minute adventure, a few things went wrong. Matthew and John were running around at one point and knocked over the case holding all the medicines and what was obviously Mrs. Robinson's make up. It made a big mess, but on top of that, the lid broke, snapping off one of the hinges. Needless to say, the next few minutes were a little tense with Mrs. Robinson muttering harsh punishments under her breath for the two boys and Harry trying (unsuccessfully) to see if it could be repaired. She was so distressed that Harry really considered for a few seconds using his wand and fixing the thing, but couldn't figure out how to do it without anyone



becoming suspicious. Cassie came in from outside a few moments later and noticed the problem.

"Don't worry, Mum, I've got one you can use. Remember you and dad gave me one for Christmas?" Cassie turned to Matthew and asked him to go into her room and retrieve the small case from her closet. A few minutes later, Matthew returned with the makeup case and a mischievous grin on his face. He handed the case to his mother and grinned at Cassie. Harry could feel her getting tense. Matthew went out into the hall, clutching a piece of paper and Cassie followed, apparently able to tell from his expression that he was up to no good and that it had something to do with her. Soon afterward, there was a screech of outrage and "You had no right to go poking about on my desk in my private things, you little brat!" Harry met Mrs. Robinson's eyes and they both strode out into the hall.

Harry raised his eyebrows at the scene that met his eyes. Cassie was standing with her fists clenched and Matthew was still grinning dancing just out of her reach. His mother walked over to him and held out her hand. Matthew reluctantly turned the paper over to his mother, and then said, "I had no idea that they were getting married. I guess as the brother, I don't get to know such interesting details." Cassie's face went white. Harry was a little confused until she got the paper back from her mother and Harry could see over her shoulder. She was holding a piece of note paper with doodles of hearts and flowers all over it. In the middle of the doodling was written Harry James Evans and Cassiopeia Ann Evans. She crumpled it quickly, obviously very embarrassed. Harry wasn't sure whether to laugh or not. He had noticed at school that girls tended to try their names out with all of their boyfriend's names, so he knew that it didn't mean anything. He had caught Hermione writing variations on the name Granger-Weasley more times than he cared to count although he always acted like he hadn't noticed. What was making him laugh was Cassie, whose blanched face was quickly turning red.

Cassie ran into her bedroom and it took her quite a few minutes before she came out again. She blushed when she saw Harry but he smiled at her and she seemed to relax. About five o'clock, Mrs. Robinson came into the family room where Harry and Cassie were helping John re-pack his suitcase. He had somehow managed to

avoid packing any socks. "Would the two of you mind going out and picking up some take-out for tonight's dinner? I just don't want to make a mess in the kitchen. How about some Indian food? Cassie, you know that little Indian restaurant we like - the one five blocks south of here?" She grabbed the phone and called in an order, but the names meant nothing to Harry. He had never had Indian food but hoped he would like it. He was starving. Everyone else seemed quite happy with the idea. Cassie got some money from her mother and smiled at Harry. He smiled back and they stepped outside.

As the two got out onto the street, Harry turned and looked at Cassie. She gave him another awkward, shy smile and waited to see what he would do or say. Harry wanted to pull her close to him and kiss her, but he too felt a little awkward given the circumstances. Instead, he reached out his hand and took hers. They walked in silence a few minutes when Cassie turned to Harry and apologized for the day before.

"No," Harry said, "I need to apologize to you. I know it's hard putting up with all these things I can't tell you. I wish I could tell you more; but I can't."

"I'm sorry I'm so impatient. My mum often says it's my biggest fault."

Harry stopped and looked into Cassie's eyes. He thought for a moment he could happily drown in her deep blue eyes. "What changed your mind?"

"Well, my mum could tell I was really upset yesterday when I came home. So, she talked to me for a long time about why I was upset. We talked about you, me, what my expectations are, about relationships in general and what's really important right now. I realized that I may never know everything about you. I also remembered you keep telling me you're going to be going away soon and I . . . ." She glanced away for a moment, blushing slightly under his steady gaze, and then continued, "I want to be with you as much as possible before you do go. Besides," she smiled, "maybe someday you will feel you can tell me everything."

Harry reached out and gently pulled Cassie into his arms. She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck as his wound around her waist. He then tightened his grip ever so gently until she was snug against him and he could feel the heat of her body against his. He felt so comfortable holding her in his arms. Harry thought back to all the scenarios he had concocted in his mind earlier today. None of them had had this happy of an ending. He felt like he wanted to do something to prove that he really would be as open with her as possible.

Harry suddenly had a thought come to his mind. He hesitated for only a moment and then forged ahead, before his common sense could assert itself. "Cassie, I want you to ask me one question that you really want answered and I will answer it honestly."

"I don't want to ask you anything. It's not important any more."

"It's important to me. I want . . . . I want to. I mean I want you to understand something completely."

"What? Just tell me."

"No. I don't mean that. I mean, I don't care what it is, just something. Something I can be totally open about. Something I don't have to pretend about anymore." Harry hoped he didn't sound as pitiful to her as he did to himself.

"Just tell me something then, something that you don't like pretending about." There were several long moments of silence. His name. That was the thing he most wanted to tell her. It was stupid but when she kissed him and called him a made-up name, it hurt. And it had hurt a little to see her writing on that paper earlier, when it wasn't real. But, of course, he couldn't. He couldn't think of anything he could tell her, really. Nothing.

"Please, Cassie. You must have one question. One thing. That can be my . . . . my price to pay for you to trust me, to believe me." She looked sideways at him.

"Do you really want me to?" He nodded. "Okay."

"Take your time to think about it. You can ask anytime that you think of one." He fully expected her to have to sort through a million questions in her mind before coming up with a good one. But, suddenly,

"I already know my question."

"What? You can't. Already?"

"Yes. I already know my question."

"Well, what is it, then?" He was probably insane to do this. He had thought this morning of a lot of things she might ask about and a lot of things he might possibly be able to tell her. He supposed that she could ask him a difficult question that might give away the fact he was a wizard or explain about something magic. He hoped he could do a decent job of making it sound normal. What she did ask surprised him. It was a simple question. Very simple. Oh, so complicated.

"What I want to know, Harry, more than anything else about you is this . . . . Who is after you, why, and what would they do if they found you?" He stood there, blinking, for several minutes on the street.

"You know, Cassie, I can answer that question for you, but not out here in public. I need somewhere to tell you where no one can overhear me."

"Is it that secretive?"

"Yes. I mean, I am in hiding, after all."

"Oh. I didn't know you were really serious about that." Harry glanced around. He could certainly wait until they got back to her house, but then her parents and brothers would be there. He didn't want to wait too long, either. He wanted to tell her right now, before he could change his mind. Down the street, he saw a small park, a patch of grass, really, but they could sit there and he could keep his eye out to see if anyone was approaching.

"Yeah. I'm serious. Come here. We can talk here, I think." There was a picnic table and not much else there, but that was perfect. No one else was in the park and truthfully considering the fact it was dinner time, Harry doubted anyone would be wandering in. Harry considered whether sitting at the table was quite the right setting, but he decided that it was probably as good a place as anywhere. There was really no way to say it that made it decent.

She looked at him expectantly, her face open and anxious and Harry hoped that what he said didn't ruin that. "There is this . . . person. His name is Voldemort, Lord Voldemort. He's very bad . . . He's evil. He wants to kill me."

"What?!!"

"He wants to kill me. He's tried several different times, about six times, actually."

"But I don't understand. Why would he want to kill you? I mean, you're . . . ."

"Still young. I know. That's partly why."

"I still don't understand."

"Well. He wants everyone to think he's some super powerful . . . . person, so that they're afraid of him and will do what he wants. After all, if one person, especially a kid, can refuse to do what he says, then, well. . . . you know, everyone could and then where would he be?"

"But, you . . . ." Harry could hear the unasked question.

"Yeah. I got in his way once. He can't stand that. And he can't stand everyone else knowing I didn't, uh, do what he wanted. Especially since I'm so young. It just drives him crazy to think I'm still around. I can guarantee you that if he even had a hint of where I was, he would not hesitate for one second to kill me. And that's why I'm hiding, Cassie. Really hiding." He stared down at his hands for a second before he dared to look at her.

Cassie sat for a few moments in shocked silence and then gave an involuntary shudder. She looked at Harry and he saw fear, pain, and confusion in her eyes. Her question was a whisper, "Is he like a gangster or something?"

Harry thought about that for a minute and then said, "Well, that's probably a good way to put it. He has a group of people around him who are almost as evil as he is and who would gladly kill me if they found me." Harry put his arm around Cassie and they sat in silence for a few minutes. He did feel a little better that now she knew what he was dealing with. He hoped she felt better but he didn't suppose she did. That sort of news was kind of hard to feel pleased about. Finally, they agreed they better get to the restaurant.

Harry and Cassie quickly went to the restaurant, picked up the food, and returned home at a fast pace. Cassie seemed really nervous, apparently fearing that someone would jump them at any moment. Harry realized he would have to talk to her later about the fact that she didn't have to be quite so worried, but decided that could wait.

By the time they arrived back at the Robinson's, they were acutely aware of the length of time they had been gone. However, no one seemed to have noticed as everyone seemed to still be scurrying about trying to finish the packing and other preparations for the trip. Mr. Robinson had arrived home from the office and joined in what was left of the frenzy. They all happily took a respite when the food arrived.

## Chapter 32

### Cassie's Rules

As the family and Harry ate dinner and talked about the upcoming trip, it occurred to Harry he had no idea what Mr. Robinson did for a living. When asked, he explained he worked for the government and he would be attending meetings in Strasbourg, France while the family enjoyed themselves sight-seeing in Alsace. Harry didn't know anything about traveling in foreign countries, but he thought it sounded pretty nice. He kind of felt bad that Cassie was missing the trip because of him, but he was really glad she was staying. He stayed quiet, letting the conversation flow around him as he concentrated on eating the Indian food. It was good although it was very spicy and he felt kind of stupid as he was forced to drink several glasses of water to cool the burning in his mouth. No one else seemed to be having as much of a problem.

Harry and Cassie volunteered to clean up the dishes while the rest of the family finished packing and cleaning. While they were working in the kitchen, Mrs. Robinson came in and asked Cassie about the list of things to do. Cassie pointed to the counter and her mum went and crossed off one of the items saying she had taken care of it. Harry stole a glance at the list and remarked to Cassie it was rather long. She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, my mum has had me add things to it all day. I'm going to be so busy doing all these little errands and things! I hope I still have time to spend with you." They both blushed a little. Harry didn't want to seem too eager about all that time with just the two of them together. He didn't want to scare either Cassie or her parents into changing their minds.

"I can always help you get the things done."

"That's true. That way we can suffer together."

Harry walked over to the list and started reading through it, just to get an idea of how bad helping her out was really going to be. He noticed that most of the list was written in Cassie's neat cursive - the same handwriting he had now seen several times and was familiar with. But every few items or so, there was something in what looked like block

printing. And it was always the same thing over and over. Something that made no sense to him at all. The list looked like this.

Water the plants every other day

Post the bills no sooner than Friday but before Monday

Ring Mrs. Larkins about next Saturday's meeting

Water the garden on Friday

Follow the Rules - see the Rules

On Monday or Tuesday, cut some roses and take to Mrs. Johnson

Monday ring Mrs. Cosby and cancel Matthew's piano lesson

Tuesday post Aunt Renee's package

Remember -- Follow the Rules

Ring Mr. Stone about the church committee assignments

Be sure to sign John up for football by Thursday

School registration materials need to be sent in for Matthew before Wednesday

Be sure to follow the rules

Harry thought that the list didn't look too bad. Although there were a lot of items on it, they were all pretty easy jobs. The only thing that really was confusing was this thing about the rules over and over. He raised his eyebrow in a question at Cassie and she, realizing what he must be wondering, blushed bright red.

"Oh, just ignore my mum's writing. She thinks that's really funny, to keep putting that on there over and over."

"But what does it mean?"



"Oh, nothing."

"Well, it must mean something. Otherwise, she wouldn't keep putting it on there."

"Not really . . . . Could you help me put these glasses away? I'm not tall enough to reach up there."

Harry could tell that she was trying to get his mind off the subject, but he wouldn't be deterred. He did help her put the glasses up, but then, "Should I ask your mum what rules she is talking about?"

"No! Uh, I mean, not unless you want a lecture. She's actually said she's going to give you a copy, too."

"A copy of what?"

After a minute's pause, Cassie sighed. "I might as well show you, I guess. She's bound to bring it up at some point before you go home tonight. I should tell you, this is under protest."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Cassie disappeared for a few moments and Harry finished drying all the dishes. He had to stack them on the counter, though, because he had no idea where anything went. He was just hanging the dishtowel over the hook next to the stove when she returned with another piece of paper in her hand. "Here. Last night, when she and my dad agreed that I could stay, she made this stupid list. I told her that we didn't need it, but then she started giving me this big lecture about, uh, well, how we needed to be . . . . Well, you can read it for yourself."

Harry took the piece of paper. It was written in the same printing as the items on the to-do list. His eyes flew over it quickly and then he went back to re-read it. It was certainly, uh, comprehensive. He looked up and met a pair of very embarrassed blue eyes. He looked down again thinking about each item.

Cassie's Rules

Be in the house by 10:30 p.m.!!

Make the goodnight kiss a short kiss.

No kissing longer than 10 to 15 minutes at a time

Kiss only with the lips - you know what I mean

Don't watch videos in the dark

No back or neck massages

Dress modestly - no swimsuit, no nightgown, etc.

Absolutely do not let Harry stay overnight (not in your room, another room, the living room) no matter what!

Absolutely do not stay overnight at Harry's place no matter what!

Harry hesitated a moment and then cleared his throat. "It sounds like your mother is a little worried that we might . . . ." He was interrupted by her small squeak.

"Yeah. I think that sums it up pretty well." They both stood there for a long moment, both contemplating the utter humiliation that this conversation was causing.

"So, uh, if she's so worried that we'll get into, uh, well . . . ." Harry thought he would rather die than finish this sentence. "trouble, then why are your parents letting you stay?"

"Yeah, I asked my mum that, too. Basically, she said that they like you and they trust the two of us. I said that sounded kind of silly, but she said that is really the reason. She always says I'm a good judge of character, and really, the fact that I like you makes a big difference to both of them."

"Oh." There didn't seem to be much to add to that. He liked the Robinsons a lot and he guessed that they liked him, too. He was glad

that they trusted him. He made a silent promise to himself that he wouldn't let them down.

Cassie the first lists down on the kitchen table where it was in plain sight, although Harry noticed that she folded the second list and put it in the pocket of her jeans. He could imagine that she would be teased forever if her brothers ever saw it. They both left the kitchen and were pleasantly surprised to find that most of the packing was finished, with four closed suitcases along with assorted carry-on bags neatly arranged in the hall. The rest of the family was sitting on the couch, staring around as if thinking that something else was suddenly going to appear that needed to be done.

"I think we're done packing," Mrs. Robinson said wearily. "I really appreciate the help that both of you gave me today. I think that you should plan something really fun to do tomorrow as a reward. Dad and I will pay for it."

Cassie smiled brightly and turned to Harry. "Great. What do you think would be fun?"

"I don't know London very well. You decide."

Cassie sat down on the end of the couch while Harry took a chair nearby. She thought for a few minutes and Harry could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. "We could go to the wax museum."

Harry wasn't sure what that was and she must have been able to read that on his face, because she immediately suggested something else. "How about Westminster Abbey or the Tower of London? They're real tourist places, but you might enjoy them. Or, we could go shopping at Harrod's." Harry tried to keep a look of panic off of his face at the suggestion of spending the day shopping.

Then Cassie's dad spoke up. "Why don't you go to the British Museum? It's always interesting. And it's free." Cassie didn't look too excited at this suggestion and Harry thought they would have to find something else to do, until John spoke up.

"I love the Egyptian mummies there. Do you like mummies, Harry?" Harry automatically thought of Bill Weasley and without thinking long said,

"That sounds interesting. My friend Ron's brother worked in Egypt for a while. Sent home all sorts of stuff for Ron - some of it was really neat."

"What did he do in Egypt?" Mr. Robinson asked.

"He worked for a bank."

"Was it a British bank, in Egypt?" Harry nodded. Maybe he should have shrugged like he wasn't really sure but it was too late. "What was his job?"

"Well, he left there a couple years ago and I'm not really sure what he did there. He's here now, at the main branch." Harry realized that this was getting him in deeper than he wanted to go. It had just been an idle comment.

"When you say here, do you mean London?" Cassie spoke up now.

"Yeah." Harry hoped he wouldn't regret his resolution to be as honest with her as possible. He tried to change the subject. "I think the British Museum sounds great. What should we do after that?"

She, however, was persistent. She must have sensed that there was more to the story than he was letting her know. He didn't want to shatter their new-found understanding by lying to her (in any of the ways she had accused him of) so he just waited for her next question, inwardly fidgeting but trying to look unconcerned. "You have a friend here in London? Let's go see him when we're out and about tomorrow."

"He's my friend's brother. I've only met him a couple of times." Okay, that wasn't strictly the truth. Harry really liked Bill and had gotten to know him really well over the last couple of years, but he did not want to mention that. This was getting him much more involved in this than he wanted to be. "I would really feel uncomfortable dropping in on

him at work. He might get in trouble." Plus, Harry added in his mind, I don't think you'd like the goblins. He just plastered a smile on his face, though, and hoped that this would be enough of this inane conversation.

Cassie seemed to have gotten the hint. "Oh. Well. All right, then. British Museum it is, then lunch, and then maybe, uh, I don't know. . . ."

"The museum could be the whole day," Mr. Robinson stated, and he proceeded to discuss several of the interesting exhibits. Cassie kind of rolled her eyes at Harry and he smiled.

"Well, I should be getting back home." It was still early, but Harry had been gone a long time today. And he knew he was bound to get yelled at by at least one magical object at his house. He wanted to get home and get it over with.

"Come over early in the morning, Harry. Maybe around 9:00 or 9:30?" Cassie was standing next to him in the entry hall.

He smiled broadly. "Make sure you're fully dressed by the time I get here. I wouldn't want you to break the rules first thing."

She blushed bright red. "Like I'd answer the door in my nightgown! Give me a little credit!"

He just grinned. "Just making sure."

They stepped back into the living room and Harry said goodbye to the whole family, wishing them the best on their trip. When he got to Cassie's mum, she started to talk about a certain list of rules, but Cassie interrupted her, "Mum, I've already told him about them. He's read them and he's already quoting them to me. Don't worry so much!"

"I'm supposed to worry. It's my job. I'll be talking to both of you on the phone, I'm sure." She gave Harry a warning look and Mr. Robinson shook his hand firmly but Harry felt that there was an unspoken message behind it. He remembered a certain vision he had in his

mind about a very long shotgun and a threat about blowing him into little bitty pieces. Harry knew he better behave himself. Finally, he and Cassie went to the doorway. He stepped out into the evening sunlight and Cassie followed.

"I slept lousy last night, Cassie."

"Yeah, me too."

"I missed you."

"What do you mean? I'm never there when . . ."

"I know. I mean, I missed knowing that I'd see you again."

"What?" She seemed genuinely confused by this comment, since they had just once again spent the day together.

"I think I just couldn't sleep since we hadn't done this." He stopped trying to explain it and just bent over and kissed her. "There, now I can sleep." She laughed and waved as he stepped down the first step.

"Yeah, me too. Goodnight, Harry. I'll see you in the morning."

Harry walked home through the gathering twilight, his heart a thousand times lighter than it had been the night before.

## Chapter 33

### Magic and Mummies

At exactly 9:20 the next morning, Harry knocked on the front door of the Robinson's house. He had originally planned on being there earlier but had decided at the last minute to change clothes. He had started by just throwing on his jeans and a T-shirt he hadn't worn recently. Then he realized that they would be going to a museum and lunch so he thought that maybe he should wear his "nicer" outfit. He had only worn the clothes the one time that he had gone to the Robinson's for dinner. After all the trouble he had gone to when he bought the clothes to begin with, he should probably try to get a little more use out of them. Plus, he remembered that Cassie had said she really liked this shirt.

She opened the door a few seconds later and Harry had the brief impression that she was frightened. She pulled him in and shut the door behind him. Then he definitely knew she was worried about something. He was suddenly nervous. What was going on?

She stood in the hall, twisting her hands together. "Harry, I've started thinking."

He tried to lighten the mood. "Well, that can always be scary."

She scowled slightly, "I'm serious, here."

"I can see that. What have you been thinking about?" He hoped that it didn't have anything to do with more questions. He thought they had dealt with that sufficiently already. She looked so distressed, though, that he took her hand and led her into the family room. He sat on the couch and pulled her down next to him. "What's wrong? Did something happen with your family?"

"What? Oh, no. I mean, I'm sure they're fine. I've just decided, we can't go out anymore."

His stomach sank down to his toes. He just couldn't handle this on again, off again thing with her. "Why not? What did I do?"

She looked up into his stricken face. "No. I don't mean we can't go out, I just mean we can't go out."

"That makes no sense."

"I mean out, outside. You know? We shouldn't leave the house!"

Understanding dawned on him. "Oh, you mean that we should just stay inside?"

"Yes. I don't know what I was thinking suggesting that we go somewhere! I must be crazy! Anyone could see you and then that Volde-guy could find you, hurt you or even, oh, maybe even kill you!" Harry could tell that she was really agitated. He thought it was very sweet of her to be concerned but they had to be logical about this. He sat back on the couch and pulled her close with his arm around her shoulders. She was trembling slightly. He didn't say anything for a minute, just trying to let her relax a little.

"Cassie. We've been out lots of times and I've been fine."

"I know. But that was before I knew that some crazy gangster person was chasing you!"

"He's not chasing me."

"What? I thought you said he's trying to kill you?"

"What I said is that if he knew where I was, he would kill me. He doesn't know I'm here. He's not even looking for me, I think. As long as I'm not too conspicuous, I should be okay."

"I'm really confused, Harry. I must not understand what exactly is going on."

"All right. I'll try to explain it. And I'm going to be as honest as possible with you."



"I'd appreciate that." He thought she might have been angry, implying that he usually wasn't, but she was so distressed that this whole undercurrent missed her completely.

"I'm here in London mainly because this is the last place he would expect me to be. I'm not wearing the clothes I normally wear and I'm not doing any of the things I would normally do. So, he is definitely not looking for me here."

"But you said that people might recognize you, remember - that night on the Underground? You said some people would know you 'cause they'd seen your picture."

"Yeah, I remember that. But, they were, um, special people." Her brow furrowed at that. "I mean, only those particular girls were likely to recognize me. Most people around would not know me at all."

"Why were they special?"

He wasn't quite sure how to answer that. "The way they were talking kind of told me that they knew some of the people in Voldemort's gang. So, I thought if they got a good look at me, they might be suspicious and if they told somebody, well, maybe they would find me." That was a good way to put it, he thought, silently congratulating himself.

"What do you mean about your clothes?"

"What?"

"You said that you're not wearing the clothes you would normally wear."

"I just meant that usually I'm still in school now and I would normally be wearing my school uniform." Of course, he conveniently avoided mentioning that the uniform consisted of black robes and a hat. She was right. He was kind of good at not telling the whole truth. But it was for the best, definitely. "Anyway, another thing that really identifies me is my scar. That is why I always have to keep that covered as much as possible. And I don't like my name getting out

too much, since that's kind of obvious. And I told you that my house helps me hide. And then, also, I have some way of protecting myself if someone finds me unexpectedly." He didn't elaborate.

She thought for a minute. "You mean your stick, don't you?" He was surprised and it must have shown on his face. "Well, you said it was for protection." He nodded slowly, unsure of how far to let her follow this line of thinking. "I have to tell you, Harry, I think you need a bigger stick."

"What!?"

"Well, if you're going to hit somebody with it, a bigger one would be better. That one wouldn't hurt much unless you actually poked somebody in the eye."

He laughed. "My stick does just fine. It's protected me lots of times before. It'll work, trust me."

She looked unconvinced, but rather than argue the point, she considered everything he had said. "So, if I understand you correctly," Cassie said slowly, "We can go ahead and go to the museum as long as we're careful?"

"Definitely." She relaxed against him and Harry sighed in relief.

"I'm so glad. I've been so worried. All night I thought about how much danger you're in and I thought I'd be sick I was so upset. And then this morning I just decided that it's too much risk to take and we'd just have to stay home."

"Not that I think staying home with you would be bad, but if you want to go out, we can." Harry pulled Cassie closer to him. She slipped her arms around him and they kissed briefly. Her hands found his wand under his shirt and then relaxed. He imagined that she just wanted to make sure he had it. After a minute, he pulled away slightly. "Maybe we should set a timer. Wouldn't want to break any rules or anything." She grimaced.

"Are you going to keep bringing those up this entire week?"

Harry silently congratulated himself on helping her forget about Voldemort and her concerns for his safety. "Only if you tempt me to break them."

"Tempt you to break them?"

"Yeah, by looking so good that it makes me want to keep kissing you."

"Well, you look pretty good yourself. I guess great minds think alike." She had apparently also decided to dress up a little. Harry thought she looked really fantastic in the dark blue sun dress she had put on that morning. He kissed her again quickly.

"So, you said your family got away okay?"

"Yes. They were pretty tired. I imagine they'll all sleep on the plane."

"I've never been on an airplane. I think it would be really hard to sleep on one. I'd be too nervous the plane would crash."

"Actually, it's not that frightening. I've been on one a few times. Sometimes I sleep and sometimes I don't." She sat quietly for a few minutes and Harry wondered if she was regretting not going with them. Then she smiled brightly, and he decided not to worry about it. It had been her decision to make. "I think the museum opens at ten, so we can go anytime. Are you sure that this sounds like something you'd like to do? Now that my dad is gone, we can change our minds."

"I don't really care what we do, but I think the museum sounds as good as any. I haven't been anywhere in London, practically, so anything that sounds fun to you would probably be interesting to me."

"Well, the museum actually is kind of interesting. They not only have Egyptian artifacts, but also ancient Celtic, Roman and other types of artifacts. I just try not to let my dad know I enjoy it. He drags us kids to it enough as it is."

"It sounds great. Are you ready to go?"

Cassie hesitated a moment and said, "I better make sure all of the doors are locked. Would you like to come with me?"

Harry was looking around as they walked down the hall. Cassie went into what was obviously her father's office or study and checked the door to the garden. "I've never been in the back part of your house. It seems really nice."

"Really? You haven't? Well, I'll give you a quick tour if you want." At his agreement, she showed him the guest room, her brothers' room, a bathroom, her parents' room and finally, her own bedroom. Harry stood at the doorway, acutely aware of the fact that Cassie had made sure not to enter his own room. It was just too intimate of a space.

Her room looked very much like Harry would have imagined it. The colors were calming, pale purple and blue, lots of white so that things looked cool and clean. Then, every once in a while, there were dashes of hot pink - a color that surprised Harry. But, that was like her also, he thought, with her occasional flashes of temper adding color to her fun personality. There were some nice art prints on the wall, along with a couple of posters of what Harry imagined must be bands that she liked although he had never heard of them. Her desk was in a corner of the room and piled with books, writing paper and a telephone. The thing that intrigued Harry the most, though, was a fantastical painting of two white unicorns playing in a forested scene. Harry took note of it but made sure not to comment. He thought, considering her fascination with that movie *Dragonheart*, he shouldn't be surprised that she had a secret yearning for fantasy. Of course, he knew that it was not really fantasy, but he couldn't tell her. Too bad. After carefully looking at everything, he turned back to her. She was looking at her feet, obviously really very embarrassed at his long scrutiny. He said, "I really like your room. You must think my house is pretty depressing." He certainly did.

Cassie looked up from her feet and smiled. "Well, it could use a little, uh, well, something. But then you're only going to be here for a little while. If you want help, though, I could maybe offer a few suggestions." Harry shook his head.

"It's not worth it. I don't think I could take anything with me when I leave or anything." She nodded in understanding.

After she finished checking the doors, they left the house and Harry and Cassie walked hand in hand the few blocks to the Underground station. As they climbed onto the train, Harry took a quick look around the car to make sure there were no wizards or witches present. When it just looked like there were only Muggles, he relaxed a little and sat back with Cassie. He put his arm around her and she rested her head against him. He let his fingers stroke up and down her upper arm, amazed at how incredibly soft her skin was.

As the train started, he looked around at the posters in the car. He didn't remember noticing them much before, but the two times he had ridden with Cassie he had had other things on his mind. He remembered that horrible experience with the four teenaged witches and shuddered. That had been very frightening for him. Hopefully nothing like that would happen today. He just wanted to have a nice, relaxing day with Cassie.

He studied the posters across from him. It was a large map of the London Underground showing all the various stops. He realized with a sudden start that the next stop on their line was King's Cross. He had a sudden wrench in the region of his heart. He thought about the Hogwarts Express and Platform 9 3/4. He briefly wondered what he would find if he got off the Underground and ran up to the train station and went through the barrier, smiling at the thought of his trying to explain to Cassie how to walk through a brick wall. He felt a sudden longing to be connected to something magical -- anything really, to prove that his life as a wizard was real, and not just a figment of his imagination.

He didn't say anything to Cassie about this sudden bout of homesickness. He couldn't figure out what to say. It didn't help him feel better that they actually did have to get off their train at King's Cross. They had to go up the escalators and over to catch the Piccadilly Line. He stared for a long time at the set of escalators that would take him up to the railway station. It took every bit of control he had to stay off them. Maybe he could just go up and look for a minute.

Maybe he'd see . . . . Cassie muttered an exclamation and pulled her hand out of his when he squeezed it too tightly. He apologized, but his voice sounded hoarse. She looked at him strangely but made no comment. After they got on the new train, they went one stop to Russell Square where they got off and resurfaced into the daylight. As they walked toward the museum, he told himself that he wouldn't be here too much longer. It couldn't be too much longer before Dumbledore came to get him, but he felt the gap between his life and the wizarding world growing wider by the day. He ached with a longing for something or someone familiar with an intensity that he could hardly believe.

Harry tried to distract himself by studying the street signs and shops they were passing. It was a nice area of town. He glanced at one of the street names. Another sudden wrench of his heart occurred a few minutes later when he realized where they were. They were only a few minutes' walk from the very dingy pub called The Leaky Cauldron. The ache that rose in his throat was now almost tangible. Behind that pub was a dark musty courtyard full of beaten up dustbins. And if he were to take his wand out and tap on a certain brick in the wall, an archway would open and he could enter another world - an amazing magical world, the shops of Diagon Alley. He was so close to where he would truly feel at home, but he may as well have been a million miles away. He was as isolated from it as he had ever been, even counting the time that he didn't even know he was a wizard. At least then, wizarding people knew about him. But now they all thought he was dead. His chest hurt with the pain of it all. He thought of Bill working at Gringott's and, of course, the twins Fred and George with their Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes magical joke shop. If only he could see them for a moment, just as a reminder that they really did exist. He decided at that moment that he probably would have traded every bit of gold in his vault at Gringott's for his invisibility cloak. He could then travel unseen and undetected around Diagon Alley and reassure himself that he could return there someday. But his cloak was with all his other belongings and where that was, well, he did not know. He had absolutely nothing of his own except for his wand, and it was practically worthless as he could not use it. He fingered it through his T-shirt, thinking that at least it proved that his life as a wizard was not just some fantastic dream that he would wake from with Aunt Petunia pounding on the door of his cupboard.

His mood continued to darken and he lost himself in long moments of self-pity as he and Cassie walked down the street. Cassie was very quiet also, seeming to be able to sense his bad mood and not trying to pull him out of it. Maybe she attributed his quiet to his worry about "that Volde-guy" but he wasn't sure.

After a few more minutes' walk, they were standing in front of the marble-pillared British Museum. Harry watched with detachment all the people going in and out of the front doors.

Cassie stopped before the first step and looked searchingly into Harry's green eyes. She hesitated for a moment and then said tentatively, "I can tell there's something bothering you. Do you still want to go in? Is there something you would rather do? Is there anything I can do?"

Harry thought silently for a couple of moments, mentally and almost physically fighting to push the homesickness back into the corners of his mind. "No, let's go. I'm sure it will be great."

Well, okay. Maybe not great. Looking back, Harry would have called it terrible, actually. He still couldn't believe it had actually happened. But he knew it had.

The first 30 minutes were quite enjoyable. They had decided to save the Egyptian stuff for last, so had started with the ancient Roman, Celtic, and Druid displays. It was all very interesting to look at, although Harry knew that most of the information given in front of each case was at best incomplete and at worst absolutely wrong. He knew enough about the history of magic to know that each of these cultures had had powerful magicians in their day. Most of the artifacts and things that were displayed were obviously magical but were explained with no mention of magic at all. Not that he expected it, but it was sort of amusing to see the extent that Muggles went to so that they could avoid acknowledging any sort of "supernatural" things.

It was in the Druid area that Harry saw him first. He could tell even from that far away that this was someone he did not want to meet. He was wearing rather conservative robes, for a wizard. They were dark

blue and semi-normal looking. And, he was not wearing a hat. (Small miracles.) Harry feigned interest in a display in a different room, drawing Cassie away from the artifacts she was looking at. As soon as he could do it without arousing her suspicions, he said that he wanted to go down to the level below and start looking at the Egyptian stuff.

Harry, to his surprise, found himself enjoying the displays about the mummies. He tried not to spend too much time looking around for him as Cassie had noticed he seemed to be looking for someone and had commented about it. Harry was just starting to relax, figuring that he had managed to avoid the wizard, when there he was, suddenly -- standing next to Cassie. If Harry had not known that there had been no "pop," he would have sworn that he apparated there. Cassie stepped back, surprised, but quickly recovered her usual friendly poise. "Hello."

"Hello. It's always nice to see young people striving to learn more about our history and culture." He smiled broadly, including both Cassie and Harry in his greeting. Harry swallowed. His mouth was very dry.

"Well, we're trying. It seems to me that the scientists don't know very much about some of these things and they're just pretending to. Some of these explanations don't make much sense." Cassie was smiling faintly, indicating the case she stood in front of which was a display of some tomb artifacts from a pyramid.

"Well, that's because they're ignoring the magic."

"The magic . . . .?"

Harry had moved quickly to stand by Cassie, taking her arm, intent on leading her away from the old wizard. And he was old, no question about that. His hair was silvery and long, not as long as Dumbledore's, but well past his shoulders. Harry figured that he was probably 100 if he was a day, although he still looked spry. Harry secretly checked his own reflection in the glass case. His hair had grown quite a bit in the last three weeks and he hadn't been able to trim it with magic as he usually did at school so it was annoyingly in



his eyes. But the good thing about this was that his longer bangs covered his scar well, and he did not think that it had been spotted - yet. He absolutely had to get both he and Cassie away from the wizard immediately, though, before his secrecy was compromised. Cassie was still talking to the man, though, and Harry thought that he might be more obvious if he made a fuss than if he just waited until an opportunity presented itself to separate.

"So you're saying that all of the tomb curses and things that we read about and see in horror movies are real, and that they were placed by magic?"

"Oh yes, of course. That's the only . . . Well, your friend here should know all about it." He fixed Harry with a shrewd gaze. "Haven't you told her about Egyptian magic?" Harry jumped.

"I don't know anything about Egypt," Harry deferred. He only knew what Bill and Ron had told him, and truthfully it wasn't much.

"Hmmm, not been paying attention, I suppose. Where do you go to school young man, that you haven't been listening in class?"

Harry's eyes grew wide. It was obvious that this man recognized him as a wizard. He had noticed in the past couple of years something that he had not known before and no one had ever told him. It was a talent he was trying to develop in himself though he had not had much success. Some magical people could tell when they met another magic person just by being in the same room with them, like a magical aura, almost, that they could sense. But, then, Harry argued with himself, he should be able to tell that Cassie wasn't magical at all and stop talking about magic like it was natural for her to know all about it. He mumbled something, hoping that the wizard would take the hint, but he didn't.

"What was that? I couldn't hear what you said."

Cassie, being the ever-helpful person that she was, jumped in. "He goes to school somewhere in Scotland. At a small school." The old man jumped on that immediately.

"Oh, of course. It's the only logical place." He glanced at his watch which Harry noticed definitely did not tell time. "It's a little early in the year for you to be out, isn't it, boy?"

Harry's heart was sinking lower and lower as he was drawn further and further into this conversation. "No. Exams were last week." This was getting worse by the second. He was going to have to be rude, then, and pull Cassie away bodily. He doubted the old wizard would physically chase them. He certainly wouldn't use magic on them . . . he hoped.

"Did you pass history, then, boy, if you can't even talk about Egyptian magic?" Cassie was looking curiously between the two, like she wanted to ask a question, but didn't want to interrupt the conversation.

Harry coughed, hiding his mouth behind his hand, and spat out one word that he hoped the old wizard caught - "Binns." Apparently, he did because a look of comprehension passed over his wrinkled face.

"Ahh, that explains a lot. Boring as dirt, when I was there."

Harry gasped in surprise. He had never thought to ask but just exactly how long had Professor Binns been teaching at Hogwarts? And how long had he been a ghost? He covered his surprise by coughing again, "I need a drink, Cassie, come on. There's a water fountain over there." He tried to leave, keeping a firm hold on her arm so that she was forced to come with him. She shook him loose, however; she wanted to stay and talk longer.

"I'm still talking to . . . . Um, sorry?" She looked at the old wizard.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my dear. Where have my manners gone? The name is Alfred, Alfred Gottshawks. And you would be . . . ."

"Cassie Robinson and this is . . . ." Harry jumped in immediately. This was getting way out of hand.

"Seamus Finnegan, sir. It's a real pleasure. We have to be going, though. We have another appointment." Cassie stood there, eyes wide, staring at Harry like he had just grown another head. The

wizard touched his chin, thoughtfully, staring into space for a few moments.

"Finnegan, eh? I don't believe I know any Finnegans." He pursed his lips, thinking hard.

"Uh, you wouldn't, sir. They aren't . . . ." Harry let his voice trail off meaningfully. He hoped the man understood the unspoken part of the sentence. They aren't wizards. He had thought that since Seamus Finnegan's father was a Muggle that the name wouldn't mean anything to this man. He was right. He hadn't wanted Cassie to introduce him as Evans. His mother's name might be recognizable. And he certainly hadn't wanted the name Harry even breathed.

"Oh, I see." It was obvious he did actually understand. The man was old but he was not stupid. He reminded Harry a lot of Dumbledore. If Cassie hadn't been there, Harry thought, it was possible that he would have fallen sobbing into the man's arms. His ache for something -- anything - from the magical world had been so acute only an hour before that it had almost overwhelmed him. And here the something was. It was probably for the best that Cassie was there.

Cassie was . . . not there. She had stepped over to another display case and bent down to take a look at some type of amulet. "Mr. Gottshawks, do you know about this, then?" The wizard turned to join her. Harry grabbed his arm, speaking softly but clearly.

"She's a Muggle." The man nodded, unsurprised. Undoubtedly why he hadn't been questioning her about her ignorance on the subject of Egypt. "She doesn't know about me." Now, that surprised the wizard. But he recovered quickly.

"Well, you'll have to tell her soon, Mr. Finnegan. You're a powerful wizard. She's bound to notice. It's not something you can hide for long." He stepped over to Cassie. "Ah, yes, my dear, that's a particularly interesting piece. . . ." Harry was beside himself with anxiety. It was obvious that the man did not recognize him immediately, thanks to his long hair covering his scar. But that didn't mean that he was not in serious danger. If Cassie called him Harry or

he moved wrong and his hair shifted . . . .

Cassie and the wizard talked for a very long time. Harry could have sworn that it was at least a week before Gottshawks finished explaining that many of the human/animal figures that most people thought were Egyptian gods were actually imperfect animagus charms. "It hadn't been perfected yet, you see, and it was common for them to just retain their human body. I don't think anyone complained, though. They still felt very powerful." Harry's stomach had tied itself into so many knots that he thought it would never unclench. He hung way back, unwilling to be too far away, lest the man should say something disastrous, but not wanting to be bending over to look at things in case his scar showed. And, he didn't want Cassie to call to him. He was not sure she would remember to call him Seamus.

Finally, they were done. "Well, Mr. Finnegan. I think I have monopolized your lovely young lady enough. I really must get back to my office. It has been such a pleasure. So nice to meet you, my dear." He bent and kissed her hand gracefully. "I shall send an owl to Dumbledore immediately, telling him what a pleasure it has been to get to know you." He looked at Harry with a broad smile, not noticing that Cassie started in surprise. "Perhaps you two can return again. I work here, you see, helping with some of the more . . . . delicate displays." And then, he was gone, as suddenly as he had come.

Harry stood there staring at the hallway he had disappeared down, unsure of exactly what to say to Cassie, unsure of what she was thinking.

"That was interesting." He nodded in response. "The poor old dear."

"What?" That had not been his impression of the wizard at all. Old, definitely. Dear, you could argue. But not, poor, old dear, like he was on the brink of death.

"It's obvious - he's completely off his rocker." Harry almost laughed, but managed to control himself, hiding it behind yet another cough.

"Come on, Seamus," she said teasingly, "you never did get a drink. It sounds like you're getting a cold."

While Harry drank the tepid water from the water fountain, Cassie rambled on about the things the wizard had told her. Harry knew that the wizard had probably been accurate on everything. It was obvious that he really knew his stuff. But she dismissed all of it, not in a teasing way, but just completely because he was . . . well, nutters was the word she used more than once. "He acted like he knew you, Harry, well, knew about you."

"Yeah. I noticed." He knew that Cassie had been aware of it and she had also been able to tell that he was uncomfortable. He was sure that was why she had drawn the old man's attention to the items in the case at that point. She understood him so well, Harry thought, that it was almost scary. Harry said, "I just kind of played along with him. I think he thought I was someone else." She smiled.

"You said you were someone else."

"Yeah, I hope you understood that. I was afraid to use my own name."

"Yeah, I thought of that right after you introduced yourself with that ridiculous name." Harry didn't bother to tell her that he actually had a friend named Seamus Finnegan at school. It had been the only name he could think of that wouldn't be recognized as a wizarding family immediately. He hadn't wanted the old man to start discussing various family connections and genealogies. That would have been really problematic.

Harry delicately tried to remind Cassie that he was in hiding and that meant that talking to strangers was probably a bad idea. Yes, even if they were old, and senile, and nice, and friendly. Even then. She grimaced. "Sorry, Harry. I could tell he was nice." Harry accepted her apology, trying to appear relaxed about the situation, but he was actually quite concerned. The wizard might have just been faking ignorance of who he really was. Harry Potter's face was probably one of the most easily recognized in the wizarding world. He hoped the man really was "nutters." Then maybe nobody would believe him if he

said he saw Harry Potter looking at mummies at the British Museum. He doubted that this was the case, though.

They looked around a little more at some displays but Harry had lost interest completely. They stopped at the gift shop on the way out where Harry bought Cassie a small bracelet to remind her of the day. She wanted to buy him something in return and, although he protested loudly, she managed to find a T-shirt that he didn't think was too embarrassing. On the way out the door, they stopped at an employee directory. Cassie looked carefully over the names -- no Goshawks was listed. She said she was not surprised, that he was too old to be working, and that he was so obviously, well, senile. "Did you notice, Harry? He was wearing a dress!" Harry coughed again and Cassie commented that she would give him some sort of herbal tea for that cold when they got home.

Despite Cassie's beliefs, Harry knew that Alfred Gottshawks was not senile. And he was quite sure that the old wizard did indeed work there. He thought the wizard was really interesting and that if he hadn't been in hiding he would have liked to talk to him longer. Maybe some day he would be able to look him up again. Harry hoped that Mr. Gottshawks wouldn't unknowingly mention something that would allow someone to realize that Harry Potter was alive and walking around London. He supposed he should be more upset about this possibility than he was at the moment. He knew the man had not seen his scar. He was a little worried about the owl being sent to Dumbledore. He knew that his headmaster would know that this "Seamus Finnegan" was really him and might be very upset that he had been spotted out in public. Harry thought for a second that he had not really done anything wrong - well, okay. There was Cassie. But he was not sorry about her. Not sorry at all.

They emerged a moment later into the summer sunlight. Harry had no idea what time it was. Then Cassie glanced down at her watch and said, "My goodness, it's two o'clock. No wonder I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

Harry had to agree. He was starving himself. "Okay. What sounds good?"

"There's a restaurant nearby that we've gone to quite often. They have an outside patio where we can eat, if that sounds nice." Harry agreed and they were soon situated at a little table in the shade of a patio. The food looked really good and when it arrived Harry dug in happily. He had finished one of his sandwiches and was starting on the second when Cassie looked at a spot behind his shoulder and tilted her head, obviously puzzled.

"That's odd." Harry had a sudden sinking feeling. Those words, when spoken around him, usually meant that trouble was not far behind. He didn't dare turn around to see what she was looking at but the prickling feeling on the back of his neck almost forced him to do it. He reached for his wand, reassuring himself that it was still there. "That old man, Mr. Gottshawks, mentioned something about an owl. And there is one. You don't usually see owls in the daytime."

"Owls?" His voice came out squeaky and high. "You see an owl?" He turned around and looked. Sure enough. There was an owl sitting on a low branch of a nearby tree, looking right at Harry. Harry could see a note tied onto his leg. This must be the promised message for Dumbledore. He felt his stomach churn uncomfortably. He hoped he was right when he thought that he was not recognized. The owl suddenly took off and flew away. Harry took a breath. She obviously had not noticed the note, which she would certainly think was peculiar. No sooner had he turned back to his lunch, though, when Cassie said,

"There's another one. That is really strange." Harry just had to turn around again. This owl did not stop in the tree, just followed the same path as the other one but Harry was positive that he also was carrying another message from the old wizard. He hoped this wasn't also concerning him to someone else. That could be bad.

"Um, it's not that strange to see owls in daylight. It's a common myth that they only hunt at night. It depends on the species." That was a flat out untruth, but Cassie seemed to accept his knowledge on the subject and concentrated on her salad.

After they finished their lunch, they decided to head back to her house. Harry had really been looking forward to spending the whole day with her but the whole museum incident had made him nervous.

He decided that he had better go back to his house. If Dumbledore did want to chew him out, then he better be there. Harry seriously considered asking Cassie to come with him but decided against it. If Dumbledore wanted to take him back to Hogwarts and was waiting for him at Little Chesterton Lane, it would make things rather awkward to have her there. No, it was better if Harry just went back and saw what was happening by himself. He would have to take the consequences of his actions. He had known that the time might come and it was a risk he had been prepared to take.

Cassie seemed really disappointed that he had to leave so early but didn't ask too many questions. They made plans to get together the next morning again although they didn't make any definite arrangements for something to do. Harry would just be happy to be with her, assuming that he was anywhere in London by the next morning. He promised himself that if today was the day he was supposed to leave, he would call her to at least let her know that he was leaving. The idea of leaving without saying goodbye to her had gotten more and more distasteful as he had gotten to know her better and better. At this point, he knew he couldn't do it.

Harry thought as he walked home that afternoon that he should have told her about Voldemort a long time ago. She seemed a lot more willing to go along with his ideas and suggestions without asking questions now that she knew that a crazy gangster was trying to kill him. It might have made things a lot easier all along. Of course, she also fussed over him like Dumbledore, Ron and Hermione, and his stupid doorbell, but Harry was used to that and had learned to (usually) not get too upset about it.

He was surprised when he got home and absolutely nothing was going on at all. The doorbell had its usual dire warnings of eminent disaster and Sir Lionel was still sleeping in his frame - just a typical afternoon in his crazy life. Harry had bought a newspaper on the way home to see if anything new was happening in the wizard world that made it onto the regular news. Apparently, there wasn't. It was a very long evening. He watched some programs on television and regretted that he had not taken a few minutes that afternoon to stop and pick out one or two videos. At least that would have kept his mind off the boredom. He would have to ask Cassie to come with him tomorrow



and help him pick out a couple that she liked. He did read through the rest of the paper, though, laughing at some of the comics and enjoying all of the different advice columns. He did not really understand most of the political news although since he had been watching Muggle television for three weeks now, he understood it better than he had when he had first arrived. He was just folding the paper up to throw it away when a small article caught his eye. He read the entire article and found himself smiling. It was absolutely perfect. She would love it.

Harry went to bed that night eagerly anticipating his surprise for Cassie the next day. Her smile and deep blue eyes were on his mind as he drifted off to sleep.

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Harry was at the Burrow. It was as chaotic and comforting as usual. They were all in the kitchen sitting at the table, joking and visiting. Charlie and Arthur Weasley were sitting at the far end of the table discussing the possibility of dragons learning to speak English. Ron and Hermione were across from Harry, each holding a big mug of hot chocolate. Ginny was sitting next to Harry and he had his arm around her. She had her wand out and was trimming his hair. The twins were entertaining everyone with their jokes and antics while Bill was in animated conversation with Cassie, who was sitting on Harry's other side. She was smiling as Bill explained ancient Egyptian magic and various curses found in tombs. She giggled, "So, Mr. Gottshawks really wasn't nutters." An owl flew in carrying a message while another took off out the kitchen window. At that moment, Molly Weasley laid a large platter onto the table filled with bacon, sausages and scrambled eggs. She set another platter down next to Cassie overflowing with toast. Cassie turned her sparkling eyes to Mrs. Weasley and asked, "Do you have any wheat toast?" Molly beamed at Cassie. Just then Hedwig flew in through the window and Harry heard himself greeting her. She landed on his shoulder and nipped affectionately at his ear.

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Harry awoke with a start and laid there in the dark for several minutes savoring the peace and warmth he had felt in his dream of the Burrow. As strange as the dream had been, he wished he could go right back to sleep and once again be at the Weasley house with everyone, even Cassie. He smiled at the thought of a sheltered Muggle girl like Cassie having breakfast in the Burrow and was still smiling at that thought as he once again drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 34

### Cassiopeia

Harry and Cassie spent the next day at her house, not doing much of anything really too important. She was crossing off most of the items on her list, making phone calls and taking care of things around the house. They did leave the house a few times for her to run some brief errands and they did stop by the video store. She helped him pick out four videos, saying that they could watch one that night and then he could take the others back to his place for later. They looked okay, although Harry wasn't too enthused about any of them.

He had arrived that morning around 11 and Cassie was practically frantic as she pulled him in her front door, convinced that he had been located and killed. Harry reassured her, shaking his head in exasperation. He explained that he had had to buy something for that night but that it was a surprise. He brought in a fairly large package, which was all wrapped up in brown paper, and carried it back to the boys' bedroom, where he laid it on one of the beds. . She asked him several times what was in the package, but he just smiled. "You'll find out later. It's a surprise. Don't worry, though. I know you'll love it." He caught her once in the room, trying to pick up the box to figure out what it was.

Harry had been watering the plants in the back garden like she had asked him to, enjoying being outside in the warmth of the sun. He had always had to do a lot of yard work at the Dursley's and it was nothing as easy as watering plants, either. He had hated it then, but found to his surprise that this afternoon it was very enjoyable. Their garden was the exact opposite of the Weasley's, well-ordered and neat, but the same appreciation for the plants existed in both - it just came out in a different way. Also, there were no gnomes in this garden to bite at your ankles if you did something they didn't like. He had finished the watering, put the hosepipe away, and even pruned one particularly wild bush before he entered the house. Cassie had told him that she would be working in the family room on a project but she was not there. He became suspicious when after a moment she had not come out. He stepped into the back hall and heard the unmistakable squeak of bedsprings. The boys' door was closed when

he was quite sure he had left it open earlier. He had opened the door slowly, to see her bent over one end of the box, testing its weight. Then he had sneaked up behind her, allowing all his Seeker instincts full reign, grabbing her around the waist and growling in her ear, hoping that he sounded menacing, "Little girls who go snooping into things they're not supposed to don't get their presents."

She jumped about a mile, but laughed and turned in his arms. "I'm not a little girl, Harry. I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"Oh, I've noticed." They hadn't been too physical today, aside from a brief kiss when he first arrived. Somehow, they had come to an unspoken agreement that it probably wasn't a good idea to start anything since they were all alone in her house and would be the whole day. But, the feel of her in his arms was too hard to resist now, so he bent down and kissed her. She felt wonderful and was very responsive to him, reaching around his neck and threading her fingers through his hair. After a few minutes, he could tell that this was going a little further than was probably a good idea, so he pulled back. She made a small noise of protest in her throat and it took a lot of strength for Harry to not pull her into his arms and start kissing her again. "I think . . . that we'd better stop." She looked frustrated and Harry thought he would probably look the same if he were to look in a mirror. He reached for her hand. "Come on, let's get out of here. I think you're just trying to convince me to tell you what's in the package." He knew that really wasn't it, but it broke the intense mood. She followed him into the family room where she sat down and reluctantly went back to folding some laundry left over from the mad packing two days ago. Harry just sat on one of the recliners, and flipped idly through the television channels. There wasn't much on, but he didn't really care, as long as it distracted him from the thoughts of kissing her again.

Before too much longer, he realized he was hungry,. "What are we doing for dinner tonight, Cassie? I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry, Harry Evans." She blushed a little and looked down at her hands. "I thought we could cook dinner together. Does that sound nice?"

"Sure. But you'll have to do most of the work." They wound up having a great time that evening. She really was a good cook and had found a recipe that allowed Harry to chop a lot of vegetables and kept him busy that way. She was actually really impressed at how good he was with the knife. Harry was pleased though he did not tell her where he had learned. He thought that maybe some day he would thank Snape for training him so well. That would make him mad and that was always one of Harry's great goals in life.

After dinner and cleaning up, they sat down to watch one of the videos, although Harry told her that it had to be over by about 8:30 because that was when her surprise started. He really enjoyed the movie, which was another action/adventure type. He noticed, though, that she kept looking at the clock. At about 8:00, her telephone rang. It had done that periodically throughout the day and every time, Harry jumped. This time was no exception. She was curled up against him and laughed when he practically fell off the couch at the noise. It turned out to be her parents and she had a quick chat with her mum, reporting on her day and asking how the family was enjoying the trip. Harry tried not to eavesdrop too obviously, but since Cassie was still sitting right next to him on the couch, he was able to follow the gist of the conversation pretty well. Before she hung the phone up, he asked if he could speak to her mum. She handed the phone to him in surprise, "I guess so." He actually took the cordless phone into the hallway and shut the door between the two rooms, leaving it open just enough so he could make sure Cassie wasn't eavesdropping. He felt like he should ask permission to keep her out later than the 10:30 that was on the list of rules. Her mother had been hesitant until Harry explained what he had planned and then she had been enthusiastic. Harry did promise to get her home safely as early as possible and felt gratified when she said that she trusted him. By the time he got back out into the family room and handed the phone back to Cassie, she was giving him strange looks. He ignored her and they watched the end of the movie. The movie ended shortly after that and he rewound it. She looked up at the clock. "It's 8:20, is that good enough?"

"No. I think you can wait 10 more minutes, don't you?"

"I don't think so."

"Yes, you can. I will tell you this, though. You're going to need a light sweater and a blanket. We're going out and it will probably get a little cold."

"We're going outside? Tonight?"

"Uh-huh." She shook her head in wonder, but did as he asked. She offered him a light jacket of her dad's. He didn't think he would need it as he was used to a lot colder weather than she was, but he took it anyway. He was probably better safe than sorry.

Finally, it was 8:30 and she looked expectantly at him. "Do I get to know what's in the package now?"

"Nope. But we are going to get it and leave." This was a great disappointment to her. She had thought that certainly now he would tell her what was in the heavy odd-shaped package. But he just picked it up, letting her carry the bag with the blanket and sweaters and they left the house. They went back to the Underground station. It had taken Harry quite a long time the night before to figure out how to get the two of them to the place he wanted them to go on the Underground. It necessitated changing lines once and then when they got there they would have to walk about two blocks. But he felt confident now, so when she asked where they were going, he just answered, "I know right where we're going. Don't worry. I won't get us lost." She seemed anxious, though, until he actually announced their stop was coming up in just a few moments.

Harry was grateful that they had not run into anyone he would need to hide from. He was certainly not inconspicuous with his big package. He probably would have been smarter to stay home. But he really wanted to do this for Cassie so he would just be extra careful.

They found the place without any difficulty, although she was even more puzzled now than she had been when they left the house. "Where are we?"

"We're at a park."

"A park? It's a little late to play outside, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but we're not going to play. Here, read this." Harry handed her the article he had clipped out of last night's paper. While she read in the fading light, he spread the blanket on a nice patch of grass and laid the mysterious package off to one side. He waited while she finished reading.

When she looked up at him, she had such a look of wonder and joy on her face, that Harry thought he had never seen anything so lovely. "Is that a. . . ."

"Yes. A telescope." The article that Harry had noticed at the last minute before he threw away last night's paper and then had read and re-read as well as clipped out had been a human interest story about people who liked to stargaze. Tonight, the moon was almost new, which meant that it was a great night to observe the night sky. This park was a particular favorite because it was far away from most of the bright lights of the city and light pollution was minimal. The article had discussed how every month when the moon was waning a large group of stargazers came out to observe the wonders of space through their telescopes. Harry was instantly captivated at the idea of doing this for Cassie. He had promised her that he would show her the constellation she had been named after. And he knew somehow that he would not be here for this next month. So it was either now or never.

The sun was almost down now, and Harry hurriedly unwrapped the box before he lost all the light. Cassie watched as he assembled it. Fortunately, it was fairly straightforward and he had it together quickly. He would have felt like a big idiot if he couldn't have done it. But he had had enough experience with the astronomy tower telescopes that he felt comfortable around them and knew how they worked.

He was busy getting the telescope focused on the general area of the sky where he wanted to look while Cassie looked around. By now, there were quite a few people at the park although none were particularly close to them. Harry was pleased that they would have a little privacy. He was unsure what to expect but did not relish the idea of being around a lot of strange people. In the dark, it was a little more dangerous for him.

Finally, around 10:00, stars started being clearly obvious in the inky black. Harry was used to observing the sky at midnight from a lot further north so it took him a few minutes to re-orient himself but soon he found it. He was glad that tonight was clear and that they had such a good view of her constellation. He had set the height of the telescope very low so that they could look through it when they were sitting down on the ground. They could have stood up, of course, but Harry thought it would be nicer if she could sit.

"Are you ready to see Cassiopeia?"

"Yes. Oh, this is so wonderful, Harry. I can't believe you bought this just for tonight!"

Harry pulled her by the hand over to where he sat on the blanket and patted the ground between his knees. "Come sit down." She sat down where he indicated and he pulled her close to him. Her back was firmly against his chest and his left arm sneaked around her waist. "All right. To find Cassiopeia, you need to be able to find the North Star first. Do you know where that is?"

"Uh, North?"

"Very good." He laughed. This was much more fun with her in his arms and the scent of her hair against his mouth and nose than it was in the astronomy tower at school. If class had always been like this, he would have kept taking it to N.E.W.T. level, whether he needed it or not. "It's the very bright star over there." He indicated the general area and helped her line the telescope up so that she was looking at it directly. "Do you see it?"

"I think so. It's part of the Little Dipper, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's the end of the handle."

"Okay, I can definitely see it."



"All right, now you need to move a little down and to your right, until you see a cluster of five fairly bright stars in a sort of flattened W shape. Can you see them?"

"Uh, not yet." Harry watched carefully as she moved the telescope. "I can't find them."

"Here, let me help." Harry removed his glasses and bent over her shoulder so he wouldn't move the telescope at all. "A little further to the right. Yes, there she is."

Cassie looked again through the eyepiece. "I see it. It's a flattened W."

"Well, that's Cassiopeia."

"I thought it was supposed to be a queen or something?"

"None of the constellations look very much like the things they're named after. It's very abstract. She is a queen, sitting on her throne, but at this time of year she is sideways, almost laying on her side."

"Oh, this is so wonderful! I've never been able to see the constellations before. Tell me some of the others. You know all of them, right?"

"I'm supposed to. But I have to tell you that Astronomy was never my best subject. I barely skimmed by with a passing grade some terms. Let's see. Well, right above Cassiopeia is my least favorite constellation of all."

"Which one is that?"

"Well, you'll probably like it. It's Draco."

"Draco? You mean the dragon?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know there really was one." He helped her find it, showing her the stars that made up its head and long tail. "Why do you dislike it so much?"

Harry sat quietly for a moment after she asked that. He wasn't sure how much to tell her. Finally, "Remember I was telling you that I knew many people who were named after constellations and stars?" She nodded, still staring in wonder at the "dragon." "Well, I know someone named Draco."

She pulled her eye away from the telescope and looked at him, completely amazed. "You're kidding! Who would saddle their kid with that terrible name?"

"Yeah, well He's definitely not nice. Neither is Draco. He's actually, um, probably my worst enemy at school."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"No wonder you didn't like that movie." He looked at her surprised. He didn't think she had noticed his rather cold feelings about it. "I didn't know, Harry, when I brought it."

"I know. I wasn't offended or anything. Let's see, what else? Well, you've already seen the Little Bear, or Ursus Minor." They spent a pleasant hour looking around at everything that he could see to show her. He was amazed at how much she enjoyed it. Finally, he could tell that she was getting really chilled although he was doing his best to keep her warm with his body heat. "I guess we better get you back home."

She glanced down at her watch. "Oh, no. I'm really late! Oh, wait. They're not home. I guess I can't ground myself."

"That's what I asked your mum. If I could keep you out later than the time that the rules said. She said it was all right this once."

"You did? That's sweet." She kissed him then, and several more minutes passed when Harry did not think she was worrying too much about being cold. Finally, he stood up and started packing the telescope into its case. He chuckled softly to himself. "What's funny?"

"Nothing."

"What? Come on, you can't laugh after I just kissed you and then not tell me why. Did I do something wrong?"

"No. I was just remembering . . . ."

"What?" She looked quite concerned, so Harry decided that he better tell her, even if it was a little embarrassing.

"Well, I was just thinking that now I understand why the astronomy tower is the favorite make-out place in the entire school. This has been very fun. And I think that sitting with a girl you like close by and showing her the sky and then kissing her has a lot going for it."

"Oh, Harry!" He couldn't see in the darkness, but he imagined that she was blushing. "You're terrible. Is that really true? About that being the favorite make-out spot in school?"

"Yeah. I understand sometimes you practically have to make reservations. I haven't ever been up there with a girl, though. Well, I mean to make out, just for classes." Now it was his turn to blush a little. They folded up the blanket and put it back into the bag. They were both wearing their jackets so that made leaving a little easier than coming.

They walked back to the Underground station slowly, enjoying the quiet of the night. "Who else do you know named after stars or whatever?"

Harry was quiet for a long moment. He wanted to tell her, he really did. When he did, he had to clear his throat and try it again. It barely came out, even the second time. "My godfather. His name was Sirius."

"We didn't see that tonight?"

"No, it's not visible from here this time of year. It's a winter star. But, it's the brightest star in the sky."

"Are you okay, Harry? What's wrong?"

"I just . . . miss him, Cassie. I miss him so much."

"Well, why don't you call him or write him a letter or something?"

"I can't. I'm in hiding, remember. I can't let anyone know where I am."

"But . . . your godfather? He wouldn't hurt you."

"No. But I . . . just can't." Harry didn't want to go into all the reasons why he couldn't talk to Sirius. It would be too depressing tonight. But the familiar ache in his heart throbbed and he knew that he would feel it for a long time.

When they arrived back at Cassie's house, it was almost midnight. She unlocked the door and pushed it open. She looked up at Harry expectantly, then down at her feet, nervously biting her lower lip. He put one thumb under her chin and tilted her face toward him, and then bent down and met her lips with his. She was so sweet. Her lips were cool from the night air, but soft and moist from where she had bitten them, a little swollen. Harry decided that he should linger and explore that a little more. He shifted a little closer to her, his other hand behind her neck angling her head for easier access to her mouth. He turned slightly and pushed her back against the doorjamb. He took one small step closer and felt her against him from his shoulders down to his knees. His thumb left her chin and traced her jaw, finding the soft spot behind her ear. He stroked it carefully and he could feel her response in the soft shudder in her body. He pulled back a little but, by then, Cassie had wrapped her arms around his neck and she gently pulled him back down to her lips.

After a moment or so, they reluctantly pushed back from each other. Cassie's cheeks were flushed and she whispered with a quiet voice,

"Harry, you don't know how much I want to invite you in. But I really better not . . ."

"No," Harry agreed, "You definitely better not invite me in. I . . . I really better go home and you need to go inside." She was warm in his arms and it took more strength than Harry thought he had to step away from her. She followed him for a brief second, but he stopped her with a gentle touch on her shoulder. Her hands fell to her sides, where they formed into soft fists, like she was restraining herself from reaching for him again.

Cassie looked at him with an embarrassed smile that could not hide the burning in her eyes which were such a deep blue they almost looked purple. Harry knew he better leave while he still had the strength to do so.

As he stepped back, his foot connected with the heavy box he had carried to and from the park this evening. His mind cleared slightly. "Oh, Cassie. I . . . I want to give this to you."

"What!? I couldn't accept it. It's much too expensive!" But despite her words, Harry could sense the longing in her. She had enjoyed the evening so much. It pleased him to imagine her looking at the stars after he had gone and thinking of him.

"I have no use for it. I can't take it with me when I leave and I have my own at school. I bought it for you. I mean it," he said when he could tell she was going to once again decline, just for the propriety of it. "I want you to have it. Really. Buy a good star chart. And this winter, when I am back at school, I will find Sirius' star and I will think of you looking at it, too. Promise me?"

"Are you sure, Harry?" She sounded like a little girl who has just been given the thing she wished for most. All traces of the young woman who had been so shyly kissing him just a few moments before were gone.

"Yes. I'm sure." He set it inside the door but was very careful not to allow himself to kiss her again.

"Will you come over again tomorrow?"

"Yes. We'll decide what to do when I get here, okay?" She nodded slowly, and Harry had a sudden longing to pull her into his arms again. He didn't and she stepped inside the house and closed the door. He stood there for a long minute, considering what would happen if he were to knock on the polished wood. He didn't. It was a very long walk home.

## Chapter 35

### A Knock at the Door

They were strolling back to Harry's house the next morning. Well, okay. Harry was strolling and Cassie was being practically dragged. It had taken quite a bit of talking to get Cassie to agree to come back. "I'm not afraid, Harry. I'm not. Really." Harry imagined that both his eyebrows had taken permanent residence at the top of his forehead at those comments. He was trying to annoy her, egg her on, and the raised questioning eyebrows had done the job. He had tried simply asking. She had said no. He had tried begging. She had said no. He had tried explaining why he needed to be there. She had said no. He had accused her of being frightened. She had said . . . . "I'm not afraid." And she had come with him. He felt kind of devious about it but he had been away too much the last few days and he knew it. So, they would spend today together at his house. He planned to spend the next day there, too. But he didn't tell her that. He would wait and see how today went.

The thought had crossed his mind that he could always stay at home by himself but that thought held no appeal to him at all and he wondered how he had managed to survive all the time before she was such an important part of his life. And somewhere in the back of his mind was a question of how he was going to manage to survive when she could no longer be there. That was a question Harry ignored. He didn't want to know.

He didn't really have anything planned in particular. He still had three videos that he had not watched, but he did not really want to spend all day watching television with her. They could always play chess. She seemed to enjoy that the last time. Other than that, he guessed they were just going to have to improvise. It shouldn't be too hard. They had always managed before.

They soon arrived on his street. Two times before, things had gone very smoothly. This time, they didn't. Harry rarely saw his neighbors; he hardly even knew they existed and he was quite sure they didn't know about him. After all, there was usually no house there at all for them to see much less wonder about its occupant. When Harry and

Cassie turned the corner, Harry pulled the now very well-worn piece of parchment out of his back pocket but then had to wait. An elderly woman was out in her yard, apparently taking out the trash. Cassie was startled by the delay and with Harry's attention off her she started looking around at the little houses nearby. Harry could feel her body stiffen and knew at once what had happened. "Harry, I think we're on the wrong street. I don't see . . . ." Before she could finish the sentence, Harry turned to her, grabbed her by the arms, and kissed her, hard.

"You've got to trust me for just a minute, Cassie, okay?" She nodded, and did not turn again to look at the place where his front door usually stood. Finally, finally, the door shut behind the woman and Harry handed the parchment to Cassie. "Let's hurry." Cassie was about to speak, but Harry closed her mouth with his and he was very gratified to hear the familiar pop of his house's appearance.

As he drew away from her, she looked at him and said, "I just have one question, Harry, about this whole kissing thing."

"Yeah?"

"What do you do when you come here by yourself?" Harry just stood there, gulping air like a fish, but Cassie didn't wait for an answer. She headed up his steps and he jogged up them quickly behind her.

"It is good to see you here again so soon, Miss. I hope that you have a pleasant day." Harry muttered the password and smiled to himself as the door opened, he stepped through closely followed by Cassie. He tried to shut the door quickly, but she hadn't quite gotten out of the way and both of them heard a very disgruntled voice saying, "How was that, Harry? I was as polite as . . . ." Then the door was shut and Harry started locking the six locks. Cassie waited without saying a word until he turned from the door to meet her steady gaze.

"I threatened it." That was all Harry said. She just nodded. Then he took her hand and pulled her close to him. "I wanted you to feel a little more welcome here than you did last time." She nodded again. Her small hands were all over him and it was only after a moment that Harry realized she had reached under his T-shirt and taken his wand.



He had a momentary feeling of panic. What was she going to do with it? But she just put it carefully on the table. Then she put the piece of parchment down next to it. She met his gaze calmly, as though accepting that this was part of his life and she needed to get used to it. Harry put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm so glad you came with me today. I like having you here." She nodded yet again and stepped forward to meet him, her mouth raising expectantly for his kiss. His hands tangled through her hair which hung long down her back today but he didn't bend.

He glanced around, remembering how the night before she had felt against him when she was . . . oh, yes. Harry made a quick half turn so that now he was facing the door and she had her back to it. He made one small step forward and then another until she was pressed against the door panels. He looked down at her, wondering if she was nervous or frightened. She wasn't. Her eyes were bright with what Harry thought looked suspiciously like excitement. Now he bent and kissed her, feeling her against him like he had the night before. This morning, her mouth tasted of mint and chocolate. Harry moved a little, angling his mouth against hers for a better angle. Cassie made a little mewling noise in the back of her throat and Harry decided that he wanted to hear that again. His mouth lifted off hers for a moment, green eyes clashing with blue. His hand cupped the back of her head and he bent down to kiss her again. Yes, there it was, that soft eager sound. "Cassie." He stepped back when what he really wanted most was to press forward. His mind struggled for purchase in the midst of the fog of emotions that swirled through him. He smiled at the look on her face. She looked like he felt. "I think . . . I think we need that timer." She gasped in surprise and the air shifted. He took another step back and pulled her away from the door. "I think that's enough of that. I did have something else in mind entirely when I invited you over here."

"Oh, really. What?" Her voice was slightly hoarse but teasing.

"Chess." He said simply and turned, leading her into the small living room. "Do you remember what you learned last time?"

"I remember, Harry, but I have to admit I've been cheating a little."

Harry looked at her, unsure of exactly what she was saying. "What?"

"I'll call it cheating because I was using something that belongs to you." Now Harry was really confused. Cassie darted back to the entry hall, where she had dropped her purse. She snatched it up and turned to Harry, pulling a small package out of her purse at the same time. "I bought this for you." Her voice turned somber for a minute. "It was supposed to be a going away present, but . . . . Well, I realize that this doesn't come close to the telescope, but . . . . You said you always lose when you play against Ron, and I thought it might help a little." Harry took the package from her, surprised but pleased that she had thought enough of him to get him a gift. He was still always very surprised when he got presents. And the fact that it was not expected, like it would be at Christmas or his birthday, made this even more special. He sat down and opened the wrapping, embarrassed that his hands were shaking a little, but she made no comment.

It was a book - of chess strategy. He laughed, suddenly realizing what she meant about cheating. She had been reading his book. He smiled up at her, and opened the book to the first chapter, "Opening Moves." "So, Cassie, did you learn a lot from my book?"

"Quite a bit. Shall we play?"

She apparently had learned "quite a bit" because although Harry did win in the end, it took quite a bit of effort on his part and by the time he had finally called checkmate, more than two hours had passed. It had been a very enjoyable morning, with lots of talking and teasing and laughing. He had kept his ears open for any noise from Sir Lionel, even leaving the door to the bedroom open a sliver and the door to the back hall open wide so that he could hear if the old knight called his name. Cassie went back to the bathroom once and Harry sat on pins and needles until she emerged. He had turned the painting back toward the wall again this morning in anticipation of her coming but she may still have heard the snoring and just peeked in. However, Harry felt like there needed to be some level of trust between them, even if it was small. He had kept too many secrets from her.

After the chess game, they both sat on the floor for quite a long time before bothering to move. It was very enjoyable, just talking to her about anything and everything and nothing in particular. Harry glanced at the clock and gasped. No wonder he was hungry. It was well past noon. "Cassie, aren't you hungry? I know I am."

"Harry, you are always hungry. How many times a day do you eat?"

"Do you mean counting snacks, or just actual meals?" He was teasing, helping her to her feet. "Because I'd have to say probably about eight, if you count snacks." She didn't appear surprised.

"I bet."

When they got to the kitchen though, she was less than pleased with the offerings Harry had for lunch. "Well," he said in way of defense, "I haven't exactly been home to go shopping now recently, have I? I've got plenty to eat, just not a lot of, um, vegetable stuff."

"First thing tomorrow, we'll have to go to the store. Maybe we can even go this afternoon." She was looking with slight distaste at the frozen pizzas that Harry was centering on two different cookie sheets. "Don't you think one will be enough for both of us? I'm sure that I won't eat more than one piece."

"They're really good -- not the cheap ones. And anyway, I can easily eat two by myself, so it won't be wasted." He shut the oven door and set the timer so that he wouldn't forget about them. Not that his stomach would let him. He was starved. He'd been too nervous to eat much breakfast. "Can't shop today, Cass. I really want to stay home today. And you do realize that every time we come back we have to go through the whole address reading-kissing thing, don't you?" She didn't comment on his shortened version of her name or his casual mention of how they got into the house.

"Yeah, I kind of thought so. All right, first thing tomorrow, then, we shop and then bring the groceries here, okay? That way we only have to come inside once." Harry nodded. She really was a little bit of a pain when it came to his eating habits. Oh, well. At least she wasn't constantly nagging him to study. He bit back a grin, knowing that if

she demanded an explanation that it would be difficult. He hadn't told her much about Hermione - not like the things he had told her about Ron -- but what he had said basically boiled down to the fact that Hermione was a bit of a nag, which was very true. Cassie would not be flattered if Harry told her that she reminded him of his friend.

The pizzas were done a few minutes later and Harry pulled them out of the oven and cut them. True to her earlier statement, Cassie only wanted one piece while Harry managed to eat almost a whole pizza before he got embarrassed and put the rest into the fridge. He promised himself that he would eat the rest later. After they quickly washed up the plates, cups, silverware, and pans, they stood in the kitchen looking at each other for a moment. "What did you want to do this afternoon, then, if you don't want to shop?" Cassie seemed a little nervous to ask this. Harry was not sure why. Maybe she thought she was being too forward.

"I don't know. What sounds nice to you?"

"Do you still have the three videos that we rented yesterday?"

"Yeah. I haven't had any time to watch them, silly. I was a little busy last night, if you remember." Cassie flushed slightly at the reminder of the evening before. Harry didn't really want to watch a video, although all of them looked pretty good. He preferred to spend time just talking to her. He was not used to sitting still for long periods of time watching television. Maybe it was a little different for Muggles. He knew that Dudley did this the entire day - not that he liked to compare this beautiful, funny, interesting girl with his disgusting cousin, but still.

He supposed that watching television with her did have some advantages. Usually, they got to sit very close together and if the movie was boring, he got to play with her hair or her hands and sometimes sneak kisses. Plus, she usually didn't nag him about eating during videos - this seemed to be expected. Not that he was hungry now but two hours was a long time. And if they watched two . . . So, a little later he watched as she bit her lower lip and studied the three boxes in front of her.

"I can't decide. I like all of them. . . .Oh, let's do this one. It's funny." He sighed as she slipped it into the machine and flipped on the television. This VCR thing was not working out the way he thought it would. It was supposed to give him something to do when he was not with Cassie, to keep him from going insane in the house. Instead, he had only watched movies when she was here with him and he wanted to be doing something else. He didn't press too far into his brain to figure out what the something else was. Considering the rather strict rules he was now operating under, it was better not to think about it. Then she was sitting very close to him, as he had expected, and he slipped his arm around her shoulders.

The movie was, actually, fairly funny and Harry laughed quite a bit for the first 30 minutes or so. Then, he shifted a little to get more comfortable and Cassie moved a bit to allow the adjustment and her hair was in his face for a minute and he suddenly lost all interest in what was happening on the small screen across the room. Because right now, he had a beautiful girl right next to him, and she was infinitely more interesting. He reached up and tugged on one of her curls. It straightened under his fingers but when he let go, it popped back into shape and Harry was fascinated with the way it picked up the light, almost changing colors as it straightened and curled under his hand. Cassie didn't say anything but Harry had a feeling that she was very aware of what he was doing because she had stopped laughing at the movie and she was holding herself very still. He found another curl and pulled gently on it, watching as it curled back over her ear. He tugged on it a little harder, wanting her to turn to look at him. Instead, one of the gold clips that she had holding her hair back popped off and the whole weight of her hair fell against her cheek. Harry's eyes widened a little bit. "Oops."

"Oops? You did that on purpose." She had turned now, her eyes sparkling. "Put it back in." He swallowed. He hadn't expected that. It seemed very - sensual somehow, fixing her hair.

"Okay. I'll try." He let his fingers grab the curtain of hair by her cheek, pulling it up over her ear but then he couldn't get the clip to go in right. After a few futile attempts, trying not to laugh at how silly he was making her look, he said, "This is ridiculous. I can do this. I know how

to make it match the other side of your head." She was still facing away from him, pretending to be very annoyed, but she was smiling.

"How's that?"

"Like this." And his free hand reached up to the other side of her head and pulled out the second clip so that yet another curtain of hair fell against her other cheek. She stopped pretending to watch the movie, now, and turned to face him.

"What is it with you and my hair?"

"I like it. It's pretty and it feels nice."

"It's not going to look pretty if you keep messing with it." She took the clips from his unresisting fingers and moved to put the first one in. He pulled it out again. She bit her lip. Harry stared at her. She wasn't mad, yet.

"By messing with it, what do you mean, exactly?" He pretended ignorance. She didn't answer. "Do you mean, kind of like this?" And he took both hands, now free of the clips, pushed them up into her hair, and . . .

"Aaagh! I can't believe you just did that! Is that how you take care of your own hair? No wonder it always looks like that!!!" But she was laughing and Harry laughed, too. He had messed her hair up pretty badly, his large hands doing a fairly thorough job of canceling any brushing she had done to it that morning. She turned to face him completely on the couch, pulling her legs up and turning so that she was kneeling in front of him, her hands on his shoulders. "How would you like me to do that to you?" And she put her hands in his hair and did a similar rubbing motion. Of course, in his always-tousled hair it made little difference. She pretended to study the results. "Actually, I think that looks better." He laughed and put his hands on her waist to steady her as she looked like she was about to tip over. Suddenly, they both stopped laughing.

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He cleared his throat, not looking away from her. "Are you still wanting to watch the video, Cassie?"

"Um, not really. Maybe we could . . . . I mean, what shall we do instead?" Harry had reached over to the coffee table and grabbed the remote, not even breaking eye contact with her for this. He just pushed buttons with his thumb until he heard the television turn off and they were in complete silence. He reached up and removed his glasses and put them down by the remote. She now was a little out of focus, but Harry could see her well enough for what he had in mind.

"I thought that maybe I could kiss you."

She drew in a breath and held it. "Yeah. I think I'd like that." Since she was kneeling, she was actually a little taller than he was at the moment as he was still sitting and it was a unique sensation as he tilted his head up to meet her lips. They kissed for a few minutes that way, her hands on his shoulders again, clutching the material of his T-shirt like she thought he might suddenly leave. His hands were still on her waist and he tugged carefully on her shirt, pleased when it was freed from the waistband of her jeans. He let his hand slip just under the hem and he touched the bare skin of her back like he had wanted to a long time ago. It was just as soft as he had imagined. They pulled apart then, unsure of what to do next. "Has it been 15 minutes?" she asked, breathlessly. He just shook his head.

He pushed down on her hips so that she wasn't kneeling above him anymore but was instead sitting with her bum on her feet which were still on the couch. This brought her to his level exactly and it didn't take more than a gentle tug to pull her over to him. His hands left her waist now although Harry promised himself that he would be back to revisit that soft area of skin in a minute. He said, just a breath away from her mouth, "I think the rules say that we can only kiss with lips, which means no French kissing, right?" She nodded, and if to test his resolve, her little tongue darted out to moisten lips that were swollen from his kissing. Harry groaned in his throat. Did she know what that did to him? Probably not. He forced his mind back to his statement. "But they didn't say we could only kiss on the lips, did they?" She shook her head slowly, as if unsure where this was leading. "Good, I didn't think so." His lips, instead of settling over hers found the

underside of her jaw instead. She tasted so sweet. He carefully kissed along her jaw to her ear, where he spent several long minutes exploring its tiny whorls and curves and found that when he bit gently on her earlobe, she shivered almost uncontrollably. He was holding her head still in his hands and tilted her head to the side as his mouth found the soft skin right behind her ear where he had stroked the night before. She gasped, drawing in a deep breath, her hands clutching yet again at his shirt and then releasing it to find purchase in his hair instead. He repeated the whole process on the other side, blowing a small puff of air on the skin he had moistened with his mouth a second ago, and holding her carefully as she shivered again, breathing his name on a sigh so soft that he thought he might not have heard her correctly. He pulled back a little to look at her. Her eyes were almost closed, her breathing rapid. When she felt his gaze, she dragged her eyelids open.

"Oh, Harry. I want to kiss you like that."

"I . . . ." He tried again. "I wouldn't complain."

She shifted a little closer to him, and kissed him on the jaw, mimicking his earlier kiss. Harry could feel the slight raspiness of his skin against hers as she moved her lips carefully along to his ear. He thought that he had never felt anything so exquisite as the soft press of her mouth against the skin under his ear and almost jumped out of that skin when she blew a warm puff of air over him, as well. His hands tightened convulsively on her waist where they had settled again. He wanted to run his hands up under her blouse, but didn't. He didn't want to spoil the moment. It was hers, right now. Instead of tracing his jaw again to his other ear, she made her way in gentle kisses over his forehead, taking little detours to his eyelids and eyebrows. He stiffened slightly, then, as she continued, knowing what was coming, but he didn't stop her. Her soft kiss soothed the ever-present pain of it and he groaned his approval as she softly kissed the mark on his forehead. She kissed it again and he thought he might melt. Finally, maybe sensing that things were getting too, . . . something, she continued down to his other ear and as her teeth closed gently around an earlobe, Harry leaned back, no longer able to hold himself upright. She remained sitting on her feet, watching him. They were both breathing pretty fast and Harry closed his eyes



to get the enchanting picture of her out of his mind but it didn't work, so a moment later, he opened them again.

"Harry . . . . I hate . . .to . . .spoil the moment . . ." He started. Was she going to insist that she needed to leave? Was she going to tell him not to touch her again? She had enjoyed it. That was obvious from the deep breaths she kept taking. "But my feet . . . are asleep. I've got . . .to move."

She may as well have been speaking a different language. He had no clue what she had said. "What?" He felt drugged, like her words were coming from too far away to reach his ears.

"I've got to move my feet." She did, then, rather desperately and this time the cry that escaped her lips was not one of pleasure. "Oh, ow, ow!" She shook them desperately, trying to get some blood back in them. She tried to stand up but they wouldn't support her weight and she half fell back onto the couch. Harry quickly regained his senses.

"Here, I'll rub them for you."

"I don't know if that's . . . a good idea." But tears were rising in her eyes. They were obviously very numb and were hurting badly. So, she scooted away from him on the couch and stuck her feet onto his lap. He removed her shoes and started gently rubbing her feet. She was groaning again but this was not from pleasure. It hurt for him to touch her, but he knew that was what she needed.

He was thorough, careful, separating each toe and rubbing it, and also spending time on her heels and insteps. She had beautiful feet, he decided, even through her socks. He was concentrating so hard on her feet and ankles that it was not until she had stopped groaning completely and he decided that he was done that he looked up at her. She had given up supporting her weight on her hands, apparently, for she was now laying down on the couch, her head against the other arm-rest and her eyes were closed. She looked so relaxed that Harry thought she had gone to sleep. Some of her hair was in her face and Harry had a moments' guilt at what a mess he had made of her beautiful curls. He bent over to push it gently to the side, deciding that having Cassie sleep on his couch this afternoon would be very nice.

But as he leaned over her, her blue eyes opened and he stopped suddenly. His left hand was braced against the top of the couch, supporting most of his weight. His right hand was on the cushions of the couch next to her shoulder. It was that hand that he had planned on using to move the wayward curl. When their startled gazes met at that moment, she smiled a warm welcoming smile and brought both her hands up to the front of his T-shirt. "Thanks," she said and gave one hard quick pull on the shirt. His right arm collapsed and he literally fell onto her. He had a brief thought that he should get up, but then she was slipping her arms around his neck and she was kissing him and he lost all motivation to do so. He slowly slipped the left hand off the back of the couch to her shoulder where it worked its way under the sleeve of her shirt, stroking her skin softly. His right hand had found its way down to where her shirt was untucked. Her skin was warm and soft and his touch raised goose bumps on it that he could feel under his fingers.

His mouth left hers and tracked down to the underside of her jaw again. That had been so nice before. But this time, he didn't stop there. He found himself kissing her neck, now, planting soft little kisses on the sensitive cord there. He tracked that down to the delicate edge of her collarbone where he allowed himself the guilty pleasure of his tongue darting out and tasting the salty tang of her skin. She gasped, not expecting that. Her hands were pushing under his shirt, feeling the warm skin of his back. He wished he had that liberty, but he knew if his hands went up under her shirt, they would not stay on her back. Her quick breaths, practically pants, were driving him insane. They pushed her even closer to him and he had an almost overwhelming desire to pull his feet off the floor, bring them onto the couch, and settle his weight even more solidly on her. He wanted to feel her softness under him completely. He continued discovering and tasting her neck and throat and, wanting to have even more skin to kiss without material in the way, he undid the top button of her shirt, pushing the collar aside and kissing the softness he uncovered. He kissed her mouth again, briefly, to assure her that he had not forgotten it. He shifted again, settling his weight more directly on her as he lost himself in the enjoyment of kissing her. His hands went back to the buttons of her shirt, intent on opening another one so that he could . . . . She moaned something he didn't understand. He thought vaguely that he should probably figure out

what she said, and he decided he could do that in a minute. She moved a little under him and Harry groaned. He lifted his head finally and looked up at her. "What?"

"Harry. Harry, I . . . think we . . . better stop."

"Yeah, you're right." He nodded with his words. He didn't stop, though. She liked what he was doing, that was obvious. She kept making those little noises and grabbing at his back to pull him closer, despite what her mouth said. Just a few minutes more and then he would stop. Harry continued to kiss her neck and pulled her blouse a little to the side so he could continue kissing her other shoulder.

Cassie pushed Harry up a little as she breathlessly exclaimed again, "Harry. Harry . . . I . . . I really . . . think we better stop or . . . we may . . ." He nodded again, knowing she was right. A moment later, Cassie pushed as hard as she could on his left shoulder. Harry wasn't expecting the sudden shove and he lost his balance. He was unable to catch himself and he slid onto the floor.

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He lay there for a minute, staring at the ceiling, unable to process exactly how he had come to be there. He remembered . . . oh, yeah. She had asked him to stop, twice. He felt hot color flood his cheeks. What was he thinking? What would she do? He had a sudden sinking feeling. She would want to leave, of course. He didn't blame her. He was unsure what to do. Should he sit up and apologize? What would he say? Sorry that I . . . lost control there. Maybe he could just crawl away and never have to face her. No, that wasn't really an option. What was she thinking? He wanted to know, but he didn't want to at the same time. Just when he had decided that he had to say something to her, a rather flushed face peeked over the edge of the couch and looked down at him.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Sorry I shoved you onto the floor."

"No. I deserved it. I'm sorry that I . . . ."

"You shouldn't apologize. I kind of . . . well, I liked it. I mean, I wanted you to do that. I pulled you down on me, remember?"

"Oh." They both laid back down, her on the couch and him on the floor. They didn't say anything. Harry's breathing gradually slowed to close to normal. He finally sat up. She had her arm up over her eyes. He could tell that she was embarrassed, even though her color was normal and her breathing was slowed. There was just something about the way she was holding herself.

"Hey." He pulled her arm away from her eyes. She turned her face into the back of the couch, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. "Your mum's fifteen minute rule is making more sense all the time, isn't it?" She stiffened, but then her shoulders moved and Harry thought she was laughing even though he couldn't hear her.

She finally turned to meet his gaze and he squinted, trying to focus. "I . . ."

"Look, we were both to blame, okay? But we stopped. So let's not blame each other or ourselves." Cassie nodded in response and sat up. Harry grimaced and picked up his glasses from the table. "I guess, you want to . . . go home now, huh?"

"Oh. Do you want me to?" She was speaking softly, hesitantly.

"No. I want you to stay longer. But we'll just be careful, okay? No kissing." They sat in silence for a few minutes, both lost in their own thoughts. Finally Cassie said,

"So, what shall we do instead? I don't think I want to watch the movie anymore."

"No. How about another game of chest?"

Harry registered the shocked look on Cassie's blushing face. Harry's eyes widened into a horrified expression and his face turned crimson as his own words finally sunk into his brain.

"I mean chess. Chess - let's play chess! Oh, I can't believe I just said that. I'm so sorry."

Cassie's shock turned to laughter at Harry's horrified expression. She reached out to Harry, touched his shoulder and smiled at him, "Funny, very funny. Chess sounds fine if you want. But, do you have any other games?"

Harry thought for a moment as he picked himself up off the floor and settled onto the couch next to Cassie, careful not to touch her. "Well, I have a deck of cards. I learned a great game when I got here called Solitaire. Ever heard of it?"

Harry quickly realized he had again said something wrong as Cassie stared at him like his spaceship had just landed. "You just learned Solitaire? Everyone knows Solitaire." She laughed, shaking her head. "Haven't you played cards before in your life?"

"We play cards. I've played cards at school lots of times," Harry replied a little defensively, "We just play games other than Solitaire."

Cassie smile broadened. "I didn't mean to insult you. That's fine. Let's play cards. I can show you a few new games - something more interesting than Solitaire."

While Harry fetched the deck of cards from his bedroom, Cassie stepped into the bathroom to brush her hair and touch up her make-up. Harry came out of his room and stood at the open door to the bathroom enjoying watching her. She smiled at him self-consciously and finally said, "Don't watch me. You're making me nervous." Harry just laughed and continued to lean against the door frame. She looked like she had been thoroughly kissed. He thought she looked lovely even with her hair all messed up (from his hands, he thought with a thrill) and her makeup all off (from his mouth, he remembered and felt very satisfied and a little embarrassed). Cassie finished freshening up and they made their way to the living room. Harry

moved the chess board to the desk. They sat across from each other with the coffee table between them and spent the next few hours playing cards and visiting.

They had just finished a third game of War (a game that Harry thought was fairly amusing) and were discussing dinner options when they were both startled by a loud knocking at the front door. Harry froze. Cassie looked at him quizzically.

"Harry, I think someone is knocking at your door."

Harry had gone pale and was thinking frantically to himself who it might be. Had that old wizard, Alfred Gottshawks, accidentally revealed his presence in London? Who could possibly even see his house? Were there Death Eaters at the door ready to kill him and . . . his thoughts turned even more frantic as he thought of Cassie and the danger she was in.

On her part, her initial puzzlement was turning to a mixture of frustration and concern as the pounding increased in both volume and frequency and he made no move to respond. "Harry, I don't think they're going away. Why don't you answer the door?"

The knocking was growing even louder and they could now hear indistinguishable sounds coming from the doorbell. Harry imagined that it was insisting on the password. It wasn't Dumbledore out there, then.

Harry still hesitated and looked concernedly at Cassie and hoped that he didn't look as panicked as he felt. "You don't understand. No one should be at my door."

"Well, someone obviously is. It's probably just a salesman or something."

Harry shook his head. She didn't understand at all. "My house is invisible to people on the street. No one can see it unless they know where it is." He could tell by Cassie's expression she did not understand but he didn't want to take time to explain, even if he could think of a way. Finally, when Cassie turned like she was going to

answer the door herself, Harry grabbed her arm. "All right. I'll answer it. Just find a place and hide." Harry took a deep slow breath and walked into the entrance hall. He looked back to check that she was out of sight. She was still standing right where he had left her. "Hide!"

"There's nothing to hide behind!" She obviously was starting to sense his panic, because she screamed this back at him.

"Go in the . . . the hall and shut the door! Don't come out!" Harry saw that she moved out of the line of sight of the door so he approached the front door, which was now practically being shaken in its frame by the force of the banging.

Harry grabbed his wand off the table. He then cautiously looked out the little window in the door. No one was there. All he saw was a completely empty porch. He jumped back as there came another even louder pounding at the door. He was close enough to hear the words in the yelling now. Along with the doorbell's repeated requests for the password, he heard, "Please let us in! Let us in! Dumbledore sent us to get something. Please!" Then, "We don't know the bloody password, so shut the hell up, you stupid git!" More pounding and then "Open the bloody door!" Harry recognized the voices in an instant and quickly unlocked all six locks and swung open the door.

He was met with a scream, a rustling of fabric, and then at Harry's feet appeared an arm and some bushy brown hair. A wand rolled noisily across the porch in the sudden shocked silence. Ron's pale face appeared an instant later as he shoved the invisibility cloak off his head and exclaimed, "But you're dead! Dumbledore told us you were dead!"

## Chapter 36

### Arrivals

"We'll talk in a second. We've got to get off this step. Come on!" Ron didn't budge, apparently not understanding the seriousness of the situation. Harry tried to get him moving. He bent over to pick up Hermione, the owner of the arm, bushy hair, and wand. "Grab her wand!" Harry could have screamed in frustration at the moment. At least the blasted doorbell had the sense to remain quiet.

He hefted the not inconsiderable deadweight of one of his best friends into his arms and stumbled into the house with her, Ron right on his heels, still stammering something about Dumbledore. "Shut the door - tight. And start locking. NO!" Ron had started to point his wand at the locks as soon as the door was shut. "They're not magical. Just lock them." Harry tried to get Hermione into an easier position for carrying before he stumbled and dropped her. He barely made it in to the couch before his arms gave way and she collapsed in a boneless heap onto the lumpy cushioning. He tried to count as he had heard the locks click shut, but wasn't sure he had heard all six. Ron entered the room, wild-eyed and flushed. "Did you get all of them?"

The red-head nodded in response, seemingly unwilling to trust his voice. Harry took a quick look at the pale face and decided he had better double check them. They were all locked and he stood in the hall for a minute trying to catch his breath. Hermione was a very slender girl and not much taller than Cassie was, but picking her up from the floor and carrying her in that awkward position had about done him in. He turned quickly again, though, to stride back into the living room. Ron was now kneeling by Hermione's head, patting her gently on the cheek. "Come on, Hermione. Wake up. It's all right." He looked up at Harry. "I think it was the shock of seeing you - bloody hell, Harry! What are you playing at?!!"

Harry wasn't sure what Ron meant, but before he could answer, he saw Cassie standing by the door into the hall and he stopped. She looked worried and pale. "Cassie, I . . . .This is . . . ."



"Ron. I can tell. Hi." Ron stood up, looking slightly shell-shocked. "Don't you think we should try to do something with . . . ." she indicated Hermione's still-unconscious form.

"Oh, hell!" Ron turned back to her immediately and Harry was gratified to note that he seemed more protective of her than he had ever previously noticed. Ron picked up her hand and started to rub it briskly. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. There was still no response. He then reached behind him on the floor for his wand where he had dropped it. Harry said quickly,

"She just fainted, Ron. Probably shock. I think maybe . . . . Cassie, could you get a drink of water for her, please? There's some in the fridge." Cassie left the room quickly. "Ron, she wasn't cursed, you don't need to . . . ." There was a brief moan from the couch and Ron rubbed more vigorously at her arm.

"Here you are." Cassie moved quickly across the room with the glass. Ron took it from her and tried to get Hermione to drink a little, but she couldn't or wouldn't.

Ron, sensing that Hermione was coming around, decided to take all his anger about the state of the girl out on the one clearly to blame for the entire situation. "How could you do this to us? All this time! It's been weeks! I can't believe that you would be so . . . hell!" Ron seemed to be unable to find an adjective to describe exactly what Harry was.

Harry felt some serious anger welling up in him as the attack continued. He had often day-dreamed of what it would be like when he saw his friends again. This was not how it was supposed to go. "You think I wanted this, Ron? Are you nutters? I -" But he never got to say what he wanted to, because Hermione's eyes fluttered open for a minute and Ron immediately turned to her again.

"I think she might be in shock. We should keep her warm." Cassie must have been prescient because almost immediately Hermione started shivering and her teeth were chattering. Ron was trying to get her to drink some water but managed mainly to spill it on her robes and this only increased her shivering. "Is there a blanket . . ." Cassie

was starting to walk into the back hall as she asked this. Harry nodded without thinking.

"On the bed. Quickly, please."

"Let's just summon it!" Ron was frantic now and Harry didn't blame him. Hermione was looking like death. Her eyes were open but clouded. Ron grabbed his wand again. "Acci-"

"Stop. Cassie'll bring it." Cassie walked in at that moment and strode quickly over to the couch.

"She's really cold. We've got to get her warm." Cassie put the blanket over Hermione and then put Harry's pillow under her feet. Harry started. She'd been in his bedroom with the painting. Well, he couldn't worry about that now. Ron stood up again and Cassie approached him, laying her hand on Hermione's forehead. "Come on, Hermione. It's all right."

Ron, apparently feeling that Hermione's situation was now under control, approached Harry, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him out into the hall. Harry felt another flare of frustration. They had so many more important things to discuss. He was torn between hugging Ron and punching him in the nose. He did neither.

"Dead, Harry! They all said you were dead!" Ron was using a stage whisper and Harry hoped that Cassie wasn't listening. There was no way she wouldn't hear him.

"Yeah. I know."

"They said he'd killed you. That he'd finally done it. There was a funeral and -"

Cassie came into the hall and motioned to Ron, pursing her lips in concern. "She's not getting warm enough. Uh, Ron, maybe you could hold her or something." Ron dropped Harry's arm and ran into the living room. Cassie pushed Ron toward the chair, kicking the ottoman out of the way, and then, "Harry, carry her over there. No, keep the blanket on her." Harry bent, almost dreading picking her up again, but

this time with proper positioning she felt light in his arms. He put her carefully down on Ron's lap. Ron immediately curved his arms around her and Harry thought for a second that this was a move that had been practiced before. "She could really use something warm like tea now that she's conscious." Neither of the boys moved. Ron's eyes glanced down at his wand. He couldn't reach it.

"Harry, maybe you could conjure up a little?" Cassie interrupted Ron's comment.

"No. I'll make it. I think I can find everything, can't I?" She was asking Harry, who nodded again, as she left the living room quickly for the kitchen. Harry felt a little guilty at the relief he felt that she was out of the room.

"Ron. You've got to stop saying -"

"Harry? Is it really you? Are you just a ghost?" Hermione's voice was weak and shaky but she was making sense, at least. She started crying and tried to maneuver off Ron's lap but Ron held her tight.

"It's really me, Hermione. Look, you two, I -"

"I've got the water going. It should just take a few minutes to come to the - Oh, good. You're looking much better already. I thought that might do the trick." Cassie was smiling at Hermione and Ron. Ron was scowling. Hermione still looked horrible. "I'll get some tea for you in just a minute." It was a testimony to the chaos in the room that no one even asked who she was and what she was doing here.

"Any chocolate?" Ron asked quickly. It was always good for what ailed a person, Harry knew. Madam Pomfrey believed in practically force-feeding it to people in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Cassie scowled. Harry shook his head.

"No. That's not what she needs, anyway. Just empty calories. She needs something more substantial than that. I wish we had shopped today, Harry. We could have fixed a proper dinner." Just then, the kettle whistled and Cassie left the room again.

"She's got to leave now, I think," Harry said, trying not to think of the ache this instantly caused in the region of his heart. Now was not the time to let feelings get in the way of what needed to be done.

"She knows what needs to be done for Hermione!" Ron had his mouth suddenly covered by Hermione's hand.

"Don't scream. It's hurting my head. What happened?"

"Yeah, Harry what happened! You still haven't told me-" Ron apparently could ignore the hand over his mouth, because if anything he was yelling louder.

"I meant outside. I think I hit my head-"

"It was all Dumbledore's idea, believe me-"

"Tea's ready. He's got sugar and milk, no lemon. I think sugar might help a little." Hermione didn't answer at first. Then, finally, sulkily.

"I hate tea."

Three voices answered her at once.

"Drink it to warm you up then."

"She went to a lot of trouble."

"Harry can whip up some cocoa, then. You'd like that better."

They all stopped. Then, again,

"I've still got hot water so if he has cocoa I can make that though I still think it's not good for her."

"No I can't, Ron! Look, you don't understand-"

"What about coffee?"

They all stopped again and stared at each other. They tried one more time.

"I don't think he has coffee. I looked."

"I can't just whip anything up! There's something you don't understand, here!"

"Fine! Just bring the bloody tea. She's shivering again!"

And it was true, Hermione - the main cause of the confusion - had apparently decided that it was too much effort to follow the fragmented conversations and had slipped back into the quiet darkness, shivering almost uncontrollably on Ron's lap. "Oh, hell. Hermione." His voice was soft and his arms tightened around her. "Harry, don't you have anything else we can cover her with? Can't you just get me another blanket?" Harry knew what he meant - he meant for Harry to conjure it and Harry was glad that Ron's wand was so far away from him or he'd be throwing spells right and left.

"All right, Ron, There's another in my bedroom. But I do have a hot water bottle and that might be better for Hermione. Plus we've got hot water for it."

"Where is it? I'll get it." Cassie had once again entered the room, bearing the tea which she handed to Ron.

"Bathroom. Not sure which drawer."

"Just hand me my wand, Harry. I'm sick of this running around. I'll get her a blanket."

"No, not 'till I explain about that -"

"I found it. Just give me a minute to fill it. Good thing I boiled enough for us all to have tea. I'll have to heat some more, of course . . . ." She came and went quickly and Harry thought it was quite amazing how she held up under the strain of this strange evening. He felt like he was going to explode. Ron was trying to get Hermione, who had

surfaced once again from the void, to drink some tea and was having limited success as she kept turning her head from it.

Another second later, Cassie came in again carrying the hot water bottle - a Muggle device that Harry had gotten quite attached to since he had been here. "Here, Hermione. This will help. Did you hit your head, do you think?" Hermione nodded slowly, apparently happy to finally talk to someone who was making sense. The boys certainly weren't. "Harry doesn't believe in painkillers, I don't think. I can't get him to take anything when that blasted scar hurts. But do you have a lump?" Cassie stepped closer to feel the lump when Ron erupted again,

"Harry, tell me what the bloody hell is going on around here. Hand me my wand, now!" A second later was another chorus of voices,

"Stop yelling, please, Ron."

"You shouldn't yell, she's got a headache."

"You can't use it here, Ron. If you'll just let me explain!" They all turned to look at Harry, all three with shocked expressions on their faces although Harry thought that Cassie's was the most surprised. She turned and looked down at the two wands which were still lying side by side on the carpet. She was the first one to say anything in the silence.

"Oh. You two have sticks just like Harry's." There was a very long moment of silence and then Ron spoke again, his tone low and controlled but the anger evident in every word.

"Who the hell is this girl?"

"Her name's Cassie and I'd appreciate your not yelling at her or cussing at her. She's trying to help, Ron. She doesn't even know you. I'm sure you're impressing her with your great manners." Harry was trying desperately to regain control of the situation but he could sense it slipping out of his grasp. Earlier, Ron had said that Cassie seemed to know what to do with Hermione, which was true. Neither he, nor Ron, nor Hermione for that matter, knew the first thing about dealing

with Muggle healing. They all knew some basic healing spells and could probably have had the girl up on her feet and back to normal in just a few minutes if they could have used them. Harry was pretty sure this was what Ron wanted to do. He was trying to pick the right moment to tell Ron that no one could use magic in the house. He kept trying to send Cassie out of the room for a minute while he did just that; but she always got back too soon to let him finish telling them. What he really needed to do was send her home but he would have to walk with her and for obvious reasons, now was not the best time. He had to get this situation straightened out first. Ron, apparently sick of asking Harry for his wand, then appealed to outside help.

"Cassie. Please forgive me. Could you please hand me the . . ." Ron got a sickened expression on his face and forced out, "sticks?" Harry immediately strode over to Cassie and took the wands off the carpet.

"That was low, Ron . And that was the most insincere apology I've ever heard in my life. Cassie, could you check Hermione's head? You seem to know something about . . . these things." She stepped over to Hermione, not frightened in the least by the nasty glares Ron was shooting at both her and Harry. She knelt down by Hermione, who was still curled up in Ron's lap.

"Do you feel sleepy or anything?" Hermione shook her head cautiously. Cassie looked at her eyes although Harry was not sure why she did that. She nodded, though, apparently pleased with what she saw. "How bad is the bump?" Hermione felt gingerly around to the back of her head.

"It's not really too bad. I'm feeling much better now."

"Good, but look -" Cassie stood up and glared at both Ron and Harry, "-- she cannot go to sleep for a few hours. We've all got to make sure. If she has a concussion that could be bad. Do you all understand?"

Harry nodded. The word was familiar to him although he was not sure of the details. Ron asked, though, "What's a percussion?"

"Concussion, Ron." The two girls spoke at once and then they grinned at each other. Harry felt a small band of tension around his heart loosen a little. Hermione started shifting on Ron's lap. "I'm hot." Both the water bottle and blanket were removed and Hermione tried to stand up, finally managing after only swaying once. She walked over to Harry and grabbed his hands and touched his face as if reassuring herself that he was real. She started crying again, and Harry enfolded her in his arms, patting her awkwardly. Harry decided that now was the time to have a little chat with the two of them.

"Uh, Cassie, this is a really big favor but do you think you could go in and start making dinner? I imagine we're all hungry. You can just heat up the pizza left over from lunch or something." Harry hoped that she would be gone for just longer than 30 seconds so he could explain that no magic could be done in the house. He especially didn't want either of his friends to innocently say something about magic to her. Now that he had all three wands there was less threat that either Ron or Hermione could throw random spells around, but he had seen Hermione once summon her wand to her, he had once lit his up when it wasn't in his hand, and he had even seen Ron use wandless magic once on a particularly vicious bludger. So he was not out of the woods completely. Cassie left without complaint and Harry approached Ron, arm still around Hermione's shoulders, so he could explain the situation in more detail. Unfortunately, since Ron tended to attack problems like a dog attacks a meaty soup bone, he was still trying to get a handle on exactly what Harry was doing still alive and the second he sensed an opening, he pounced.

"Are you ever going to tell us why the entire world thinks you're dead when in fact you are sitting here all comfy in London, laughing at all of us!"

"Ron, that's not fair," Hermione spoke up, holding on to Harry like she was afraid he would disappear again if she let go. "I'm sure Harry has a perfectly good reason why we all thought he was dead." Harry heard a crash of breaking glass and turned quickly to see Cassie standing in the doorway. She had dropped a teacup, apparently bringing a refill for Hermione.



"Dead? Why would everyone think he was dead? You mean, all this time? You, oh!" She seemed more horrified than Harry expected. He stood up and approached her, pulling her away from the glass and tea all over his floor. He would deal with that in a moment.

"It wasn't my idea. That's what I've been trying to tell everybody. I'm in hiding from, well . . ."

"Voldemort?" Cassie filled in helpfully and both Ron and Hermione gasped that she should not only know the name but could say it so casually.

"If you've been in hiding, then, from You-Know-Who" Ron said again, his voice low, speaking each word clearly, "And you couldn't trust your best friends with the fact that you were still breathing . . . ." His voice was loud now, angry again, "Then I have to ask again, Who the hell is this girl that she could know and we couldn't?"

"Ron!" Hermione hissed at him, "That is so rude."

"Dumbledore said I wasn't to tell anyone, Ron. He said that one slip from anyone could be the end of his plan. Look. I really can't explain this right now." Harry paused, again feeling very agitated at Ron. They needed to deal with important issues. Now wasn't the time for extended story-telling. "I need to know how you got here and how we're going to get back. I'm assuming that you came to get me." They both had comprehension cross their faces and Harry thought that he might have laughed if it hadn't been so serious. They both looked back at Harry and nodded.

"We came by portkey and we're going back the same way." Hermione answered this since Ron seemed unwilling to volunteer this information in front of the stranger. "We have to stay here for exactly 24 hours and then go back. We can tell you all about it but it's going to take a while." Harry nodded.

"Okay. That gives me plenty of time, then, to get Cassie back home."

All three sets of eyes turned to her. She sat on the lumpy couch, twisting her hands in her lap. "I still don't understand what is going on. I knew you were hiding from that Voldemort guy but you didn't say that you were pretending to be dead."

"Cassie, this is so complicated. I'll try to explain but it's going to take a while. Do you think that you could go finish dinner? It'll be easier once we've eaten, I'm sure." Hermione stood up again and followed her, realizing that Harry needed Cassie to be out of the room for a few minutes.

"I'll help you, if you don't mind. Then maybe you can tell me how you happened to meet our Harry Potter." Cassie stopped so suddenly that Hermione literally ran into the back of her.

"What did you say?" She turned and stared at Harry. He wanted to scream in frustration. This was a nightmare. A total nightmare. Hermione bit her lip, undoubtedly realizing that she had made a very big mistake although she was not sure exactly what it was.

"I said you could tell me -"

"His name. What did you say his name was?"

"Uh, Harry Potter?" There was no use trying to take it back. It had been spoken, heard, and understood.

"Oh." There was a long silence. No one said anything. "I think, Hermione . . . . I think I'd rather just be by myself for a few minutes, if that's all the same to you." Cassie turned without another word and stepped into the hallway, crossed into the kitchen, and shut the door behind her, leaving Hermione out in the hall.

"Okay," Hermione said to the closed door. She came back into the living room. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't know that she didn't know who . . . ."

"I know. You don't know anything. I'm trying to tell you a few basic facts before you mess things up even more. So if you'll just shut up," Harry turned and glared at Ron, "and listen for a minute-"

"How come she didn't recognize you? She knew about your scar and everything." Ron was missing the big picture, that was obvious. All right. He was just going to have to come right out and say it before either of them blew the whole thing.

"She didn't know about me, Ron, because she'd never heard my name before, never heard of Voldemort, never heard of curse scars. It should be painfully obvious to even you, Ron. Cassie is a Muggle!" Ron's and Hermione's eyes both suddenly fastened on the living room doorway and Harry knew. She had come back into the room and heard him. Nothing was going right tonight, nothing at all.

## Chapter 37

### Conversations

Harry turned slowly, knowing that he would see Cassie standing there and dreading it. She had been crying and she was clutching a crumpled paper towel in her hands. She opened her mouth to try to say something but then closed it again. She looked at Harry and then at Ron and Hermione's shocked looks. Cassie flushed as they all stared at her. Harry wanted to put his arms around her and tell her that everything was going to be all right, but he wasn't sure that he believed it himself at the moment. He knew that his tone of voice had made the word Muggle sound like it was an obscenity and he had absolutely no idea how he was going to explain what he had meant.

No one said anything for quite a few seconds. Cassie just stared at Harry. He met her eyes, trying to put all the emotions he was feeling into his gaze, but her eyes were cold. This was definitely not good. She finally sniffed, straightened her shoulders, and wiped at her face with the almost-shredded paper towel. She walked into the room and crossed to the couch where she sat down. "I'm not sure what it was you just called me, Harry Potter," she said, emphasizing his last name. He flushed a little. Cassie continued, "It didn't sound very nice, though. What is a . . . Muggle?"

Hermione sat down next to Cassie and said soothingly, "Harry didn't call you anything bad. Really. He wasn't insulting you. Muggle is just a name for people who aren't . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realized she didn't know how to finish the sentence without compromising the three of them.

Cassie turned her head and looked at Hermione, "Aren't what, Hermione?" She was calm, but Harry had known Cassie long enough to understand that this just masked her frustration and anger. She was definitely angry and probably very hurt. Harry couldn't really blame her. She undoubtedly felt like an outsider with the three of them already and now she thought that he, the one person in the room who should be standing up for her, was teasing or, worse yet, insulting her.

"It's just a name we use for people who aren't . . . going to our school." There was another long moment of shocked silence. Cassie wiped her face with the back of her hands and stood up.

"Is that the story you want to stick with, Harry?"

"Uh, yeah. I think so. Yeah." Her eyes flashed. He felt even worse if this were possible. He was lying to her again and she knew it. He could use some back up here, he decided; he turned to his friends, hoping that one of them could contribute to the conversation. No such luck, though. Ron and Hermione were looking at him with varying degrees of amusement in their eyes. Ron was almost laughing, Hermione was looking exasperated. Ron shook his head and found something very interesting to study on the ceiling. Harry wasn't sure what to do or how to make things right with Cassie again. She wouldn't believe anything he said now, obviously, and he thought that he would feel the same had the situation been reversed.

"Well, fine then. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. I hope that no one has any objection to frozen pizza and frozen chicken strips. That's all there is, I'm afraid." Cassie left the room quickly, yet again shutting the door behind her. He took two steps toward the door, anxious to go to her and at least talk about things but he knew that he needed to talk to Ron and Hermione first. He turned around and faced them again.

"Can't we heat the pizza up a little bit, Harry? At least?" Ron was looking fairly concerned. Both Harry and Hermione looked at him. Harry was incredulous.

"Look, Ron. That is the least of our worries right now. What I've been trying to tell you since you got here is much more important than your dinner." Harry was at the end of his rope. Would they never settle down and listen to what he had to say? He decided he had better just spit it out before Cassie came back. "You cannot do magic in the house. None. Not at all. Just forget you even know how until we leave tomorrow."

"What? Why?" They had identical flummoxed expressions on their faces.

"Well, the way Dumbledore explained it to me is this - the Ministry wizards notice when magic is being done where it is not expected. That's how come they can send out owls to Hogwarts students who do magic over the summer and things. Magic shouldn't be done here. If it is, someone will notice and come to investigate. That might help them find me."

"Well, yeah, I can see that," said Ron rather defensively. "But we're leaving tomorrow so who cares?"

Hermione answered this, and Harry was happy to let her. "Ron, a day could be a very long time if they found us. After all, how long does it take to cast Avada Kedavra?"

"Well yeah, but no one could find us here, even if they looked. I mean the house is Fidelius charmed and every. . . ." The door into the living room opened again and everybody stopped talking. Cassie stepped into the pregnant silence. Everybody looked at her. She looked around at everyone, sniffed, and walked over to the easy chair.

"It'll be about 10 minutes or so. What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, really." All three of them said that together. She just bit her lip in that way that told Harry she was thinking. Great. Now she would assume they were talking about her, and not in a flattering way. Harry was amazed that she had not already gathered up her purse and insisted that she be taken home immediately. He wouldn't have blamed her if she had.

"Oh." No one said anything for another couple of minutes until Harry could feel the nervous tension building up. But he could not think of a single thing to say to break the silence. Ron cleared his throat, trying to help out, obviously.

"So, what exactly have you two been doing to entertain each other?"

Cassie sat frozen for a moment. Her eyes flew to Harry's face. Then she looked at Ron and her face turned bright red. She stood up immediately.

"I'll go set the table." With that she walked back into the kitchen.

Harry thought for a second. She had obviously just had her feelings hurt again, but he couldn't think what Ron had said. He was just trying to ask what they had . . . . Oh! It suddenly dawned on him. The way Ron had asked the question, it sounded like he knew . . . . like Harry had been telling his friends . . . . Harry had thought things couldn't get worse. He realized that they just had. He turned to Ron and Hermione as he headed for the kitchen to join her, "I better help."

Harry went into the kitchen and shut the door behind him. She was standing at the open cupboard door, and her shoulders were shaking. "You don't have enough plates or cups for four. You just have two." She turned away from him. It was obvious that she was crying and that she didn't want him to see.

"Cassie . . . ." He came up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. She tried to shrug them off, but he wouldn't move them. "I'm so sorry about everything that's happened tonight."

"I can't believe what you're doing. I don't think I know you at all. It's obvious that you've been talking about me with them. Why did you tell them about this afternoon and everything? Are you purposely trying to embarrass me? I . . . I don't know what that word you called me means, but it's obviously pretty bad. I could see by the looks on their faces they were shocked."

"I didn't tell them about this afternoon, not one word. And I know that you don't have any reason to believe me but I just want you to know that we weren't talking about you. We were just talking about things that you wouldn't understand." He avoided the subject of the word "Muggle" completely. He hoped that he wouldn't have to try to explain it again - his first attempt had been bad enough.

"You must think I'm a brainless idiot! What could you be talking about that I wouldn't understand?! You keep sending me out of the room like I'm a stupid baby who couldn't possibly understand adult conversation! Did you think I wouldn't notice?" Cassie went to pull away but Harry held her firmly.

"Cassie, I really can't explain because it has to do with my hiding and if I were to tell you, then you could be in danger, too."

"But they can know?"

"Yeah. They already know."

"What do they know that you haven't told me, Harry? You told me that you had told me all the stuff about why you have to be in hiding and who you are hiding from and everything. Of course, that was probably not really the truth." Her voice was rough and Harry knew that she was trying not to cry again.

"I did tell you all about that, but there are a lot of, um, reasons why I have to be in hiding and why Voldemort is chasing me. They know all about these things. And the reason they can know and you can't is . . . . They have to know. They live with it . . . . Look, let me explain it this way, all right? If you can't believe me maybe you can at least understand a little bit, okay?" She nodded but Harry could still feel her shaking under his hands and her breathing was rough. "When I go back home tomorrow, you'll be staying here and you'll be safe here. You never have to think about me or about the people trying to hurt me ever again. Everything I tell you just makes it a little more likely that you might get hurt."

"So you're trying to tell me that I should be happy to be ignorant. That ignorance is bliss and all that." It sounded terrible when she said it. "You act like when you leave I'll just forget all about you and not care that crazy people are trying to kill you! Like I won't read the papers every day, terrified that I'll read an article saying they finally succeeded!" She turned then, and Harry couldn't tell whether she was more hurt or angry now. "You act, Harry Ev - Potter, like I will just happily go back to my life and forget you ever existed. Well that's not how it's going to be, is it?" He shrugged. That was a mistake. Fire flared behind the ice that had been her gaze in the last few minutes. "That's not how it's going to be, I can assure you! And if your friends out there deserve to hear the whole truth because they care about you and care what happens to you, then so do I!"



"Cassie. I appreciate your caring about what happens to me, but . . ."

"You appreciate it?! Do you think this is some sort of charity thing, my caring for you? Do you think that the thought of your leaving tomorrow isn't ripping my heart out and . . . ." She sobbed, then, completely overcome with all the different emotions that she didn't know how to express and Harry pulled her into his arms.

"Oh, Jeesh, Cassie. I don't know how to tell you these things. It's all just so complicated. I just know I don't want you to be hurt because of me. I don't want it to hurt more than it already does. I've been waiting to go back since I got here, and now . . . .Well, I don't know if I can stand to leave you. But I have to. I don't have any choice." He stroked her hair. " I'm so sorry. I'm sorry for a lot of things. I'm especially sorry that I've dragged you into this whole mess. I don't know right now how it's going to work out. But I can tell you one thing I'm not sorry for. I'm not sorry that I have you as a . . . friend. And I hope that you aren't sorry for that, either." She was shaking her head.

"I'm not. I'm really not."

Cassie rested her head on Harry's shoulder and slowly wrapped her arms around him. They were still holding each other a minute later when they heard someone clear their throat. They looked up and Ron and Hermione were standing in the kitchen doorway. "Do you two need some help?" Hermione asked. She looked concerned. Harry smiled and her eyes widened slightly.

"No. I think we've got things all straightened out." He looked at the table which was not set at all and then remembered what Cassie said. "We'll have to use paper plates and cups. I don't have enough real stuff." He reached into another cupboard and pulled out a small stash of plates, cups, and even plastic forks and knives. He had been using these when it was just him eating although he had never admitted it to Cassie. It saved him from having to do a lot of washing up.

The timer went off a minute later and Cassie grabbed the pizza and chicken fingers out of the oven. It was a bit of a tight fit around the little table, but no one objected too much.

Ron eyed his pizza warily for a second but finally took a bite. "Hey, this isn't frozen!" Cassie looked at him a little strangely. Harry forced himself to laugh and Hermione joined in.

"That's hilarious, Ron." Ron wasn't sure what they were laughing at but got the hint that he had said something really strange and that he needed to cover it up.

"Okay, um, I know it was a stupid joke. Sorry. But seriously, Cassie, this is pretty tasty. I was getting really hungry." She grimaced. Harry supposed that she thought the world was close to coming to an end if she was getting complimented on reheated frozen pizza. She didn't say anything, though, so Harry relaxed and said to Ron,

"Yeah, I guess you didn't get to eat dinner in the Great Hall tonight, did you?" Harry thought longingly of the wonderful meals the house elves always supplied. Not that he was starving here, but the thought of not having to cook everything he ate was certainly appealing. He took a bite of pizza.

"No, we had to leave right before dinner, unfortunately." Hermione filled in since Ron's mouth was full. "Dumbledore was quite insistent that we leave exactly at . . . ." She trailed off, a small mew of horror emerging. She looked at Cassie with wide eyes and met blue eyes equally as wide.

"Are you trying to tell me that you left your school, in Scotland, today before dinner? And you're here now for dinner? How is that possible?" There was a very long moment of complete silence around the table while all three friends tried desperately to think of a possible explanation that would make sense to the Muggle girl. Finally, Harry swallowed his pizza which now tasted like sawdust, and answered her.

"Cassie, I think this is just one of those things that is going to have to remain a secret."

"Oh. All right." She looked down at her plate. She pushed her chicken strips around with her fork a little. "I think I'll wait and eat when I get home." Harry felt nauseated. Things were going from bad to worse.

He was hoping to leave her with at least a few happy memories of their time together.

After a minute or so of everyone sort of picking at their food again, Cassie looked at Hermione and Ron and said, "You must think I'm a very grumpy person who cries all the time or something. I've been acting like a real witch since you got here. I'm sorry. " Harry choked on his bite of pizza and grabbed his glass for a much-needed drink. He looked at Hermione who was sitting across from him. She scowled. Harry could see she was about to say something and he shook his head. She rolled her eyes ever so slightly but turned to Cassie.

"It's okay, Cassie. It really is. I can understand your frustration and confusion over everything going on." With that Hermione gave a kick to Ron who had been hungrily munching on his third piece of pizza. He seemed to be the only one with much of an appetite.

"Ow! What?" Ron looked at Hermione to see why she had kicked him. She looked at him and gave a quick nod toward Cassie. "Oh," Ron mumbled, turning a shade redder, "I'm sorry I said hell at you so many times. I was worried about . . . well, I was just surprised."

Cassie smiled and Harry relaxed again. If they could just get through the next 30 minutes without too much difficulty then maybe he could make things up to her on the way home. He hoped he at least got to kiss her good-bye. They all sat in an uneasy silence again for a few minutes, everyone picking at their food except for Ron who was eating happily, seemingly unaware of everyone else's discomfort.

"So, Cassie," Hermione said, obviously struggling for something to say, "tell us a little about your family."

"Um, well. There's not much to say, really. I live with my parents and two little brothers. They're in France right now, on holiday. Well, my dad's at a meeting for work and my mum and brothers are sight-seeing." Hermione jumped on the fact that they were in France, explaining that she had been there a few years ago. They talked animatedly for a while about the joys and struggles of traveling abroad, apparently finding something in common in their enjoyment

of seeing new places. Harry watched Cassie as he ate, trying not to be too obvious about it. He knew that he would be walking her home soon. He allowed himself a moment of self-pity at that thought. And then he would leave her and come back here and then tomorrow night, he would be going to fight Voldemort.

He didn't want to think about that, but his mind kept poking at it, kind of like a tongue at a loose tooth. Even assuming he would live through the battle, which was always questionable, fighting Voldemort always involved a lot of pain. Being near him was agony enough and then Voldemort had a strong penchant for using the Cruciatus curse on Harry, as well. Fighting him usually took every bit of Harry's strength and then some. Sitting here in this kitchen with his two, no three, best friends, the upcoming battle seemed far away, like storm clouds on the horizon. But Harry knew they were fast approaching and he knew that he would have to face them. There was a little part of him that wanted to stay here, safe and warm, even if he had to have frozen pizza every night for the rest of his life.

Especially if he had someone to share it with. He watched as Cassie gestured with her hand at something Hermione had said. It had been an interesting three weeks with her and he had probably taken far too many chances but he didn't regret any of it. He did regret having to leave her. She had taken up permanent residence in a part of his soul that he had never known existed before. He wasn't sure that he could stand not knowing where she was or what she was doing. Maybe he could write to her every once in a while.

Harry watched Hermione for a minute as she talked to Cassie. Then he let his eyes stray toward Ron, who was also looking at Hermione. He had noticed that Ron and Hermione's relationship, although this had not been stated out loud, had finally turned from friendship to romance. It wasn't anything he could distinctly pin down, although the way that Hermione had curled up on Ron's lap earlier had been an early hint. It was just something in the way they looked at each other and the way Ron was so protective of her. Good. It was about time.

"So, what does your dad do . . . as a job, Cassie?" Harry's eyes snapped back to Hermione at the question. Both girls were eating now although Cassie didn't look like she was enjoying it too much.

Apparently, the relaxation of tensions had reawakened their appetites. Harry tried to get more enthused about his own rapidly-cooling food but couldn't. He was too nervous that someone would say something that would ruin everything with Cassie. It was already such a precarious peace.

"Well, it's all rather boring, I'm sure. He works for the government. My mum works part-time in a crafts shop, too. What do your parents do?"

"They're both dentists, actually."

"Both of them?"

"Yeah, and it's as bad as you think. Everything I eat at home has to be sugar free." Harry snorted at this, thinking that Cassie probably had the same restrictions as her mum was such a health-food fanatic. Both Hermione and Cassie threw him a funny look. He just stared at his plate.

Cassie turned to Ron, trying to include him in the conversation. "What do your parents do, Ron?" Harry gasped and tried to kick Ron under the table, but he was not paying attention, more interested in stealing a chicken strip off Hermione's plate.

"My dad works for the Ministry." Oh, no. It was as bad as Harry thought. Apparently, Ron suddenly realized what he had said because he flushed and suddenly became fascinated by a small crumb on his plate and abandoned his efforts at pilfering the chicken. Cassie looked a little surprised by this statement.

"Really? Maybe my dad would know him. Which department?"

"Um, I'm not sure I . . . ."

Harry saw that this conversation was going into dangerous territory. He decided he had better speak up. "Is everyone finished? We should probably be going, Cassie." She nodded and Harry hoped it was reluctance to say good-bye to him that was making her get up so slowly from the table. He turned to his two friends.

"Would the two of you be willing to clean up the kitchen while I walk Cassie back home?"

Ron looked at Harry in surprise. "What? You want us to clean up with no mag . . .?"

"Yes, Ron," Hermione cut in, staring at him with a no-nonsense look, "We can do that while Harry walks Cassie home. It'll be fun." Ron just looked down at her and grimaced, obviously thinking that she had gone mental.

"Okay, but may I have my ah . . . stick back?"

Harry knew that it wasn't really reasonable to take both other wands with him although it was tempting. But he also knew that if he took them, it would leave Ron and Hermione completely defenseless. He smiled at Ron. "I guess it depends on what you plan to do with your stick?"

Ron looked at Harry for a moment and glumly replied, "I guess nothing."

Harry laughed and handed the two wands to Ron and Hermione. As he did so, Cassie smiled at Ron with what Harry thought was a sly little look and asked, "So, what exactly do you do with your stick, Ron?"

Ron swallowed hard and sneaked a glance at Harry who was shooting daggers at him and then looked back at Cassie.

"Uh . . . I guess the same as Harry."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "I figured you'd say something like that." She then smiled openly at both Ron and Hermione and said, "It was nice meeting you. Maybe we can see each other again sometime." Ron and Hermione said good-bye as Harry and Cassie went into the entry hall where she grabbed her purse and he stuck the wand under his shirt. "I'll be back in about an hour or so. It's kind of a long walk - there and back. I know the password, of course, so you don't have to worry." He stepped to the front door to start unlocking it.

As Harry reached up to unlock the first lock, he looked out the window to make sure the street was free of Muggles and then did a double take. No! He thought. How could that be? He looked again and his heartbeat and breathing began to quicken. He turned around, refusing to believe what he had seen. He looked again. Cassie started to ask what was wrong, but Harry didn't know how to answer her. Instead, he went to the doorway of the kitchen. "Ron! Hermione! Come to the front door and tell me if I'm seeing who I think I'm seeing or if I'm just having a nightmare."

Ron was the first out of the kitchen, with Hermione following close behind. He put his face up to the little window in the door as the other three crowded around. It took little time for Ron to look, comprehend, and respond with unchecked alarm and intense hatred: "Malfoy!"

## Chapter 38

### Proof

The four continued to try to look out the small window, and it wasn't working at all. Finally Harry said, "This is ridiculous. Let's just look out the window in the living room." Everyone turned and hurried quickly into the living room to the large plate-glass window. Hermione and Ron were both at the side of the long beige curtains peering cautiously out through a crack they had made by pushing the curtain aside. Cassie was at the middle of the window peeking through the slit in the large curtain. Harry, who had come into the room behind the rest, just shook his head, walked over and opened the curtains wide.

"I don't know why you're all sneaking around the curtain. He can't see in."

Ron and Hermione jumped back against the wall and Cassie, who was now standing in the middle of the bare window, first froze, then looked right, then left, and then back to the right before crouching and hurriedly moving right out of the frame of the big window. She looked at Harry with an exasperated look.

"What do you mean he can't see us? He's only a few feet from the window."

"He really can't see us. Remember, the house is invisible to him," Harry muttered as he took a better look at Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy was standing there looking carefully up and down the street and, every so often at the buildings surrounding him.

"That can't be. It's impossible for a house to be invisible."

Cassie had interrupted Harry's thoughts. He turned and looked at her and then glanced over at Ron and Hermione. "No, it really is possible. We're here in this house, he just can't see it. No one can see it unless they have the correct address and are thinking about it when they arrive."



"But," countered Cassie, "I've seen the place each time we came here."

No. You only saw the place after I showed you the address, you thought about it, and we kissed."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other with silly grins on their faces. "I don't remember kissing being part of the Fidelius charm," Hermione said in a sort of teasing voice. "We just had to think about the address and the house appeared - just like at Grim -"

"Yeah, well, I thought would keep Cassie busy so she wouldn't notice a house suddenly appearing where one hadn't been before." Harry blushed a little. It had worked and very well but that didn't mean he had wanted Ron and Hermione to know about it. Ron just smirked. Cassie looked at Harry and blushed, too.

"But I still don't understand how anything can make a place invisible. It's just not possible." No one answered her. There really wasn't any answer to give.

Harry wanted to get off of this subject and onto something of more importance - getting Cassie home. He began to think to consider various options as Cassie, Ron, and Hermione went back to staring out the window. Cassie was paying particular attention to Malfoy with his long blond hair, black robes, cape and cane. After a moment, she turned from the window with a deeply troubled look.

"That man is evil. I can feel it from here. Who is he?"

"Do you remember what I told you about the boy named Draco? Well, that's his father, and evil is a pretty apt description. He hates me. Wants to kill me." Harry tried to sound casual about it although he was quite panicked about this whole situation.

Is he a part of that Voldemort guy's gang?"

"Gang?" Ron had turned from the window and was staring at Cassie.

"She means Voldemort's Death Eaters," Harry explained. "That's how I explained them to her."

"Death Eaters!" Cassie exclaimed. Her eyes were wide with concern. "Is that their name? They sound awful." She gave an involuntary shudder.

Harry looked at Hermione. "Hermione, you need to tell me everything you know about a Fidelius charm and we need to figure out how we can get Cassie safely home and still not let Malfoy figure out where we are."

"You don't ask for much do you, Harry?" Hermione was shaking her head but Harry could tell she was intrigued by the challenge. This was the sort of thing she really liked to do. For the next several minutes, the two of them talked to each other offering ideas and arguments. Ron didn't join in. Cassie just stared out the window and Harry tried to keep the trembling out of his voice so she wouldn't hear it and be frightened.

"Well, let's think of the obvious solution. She could go out a back way perhaps."

"Hermione, that wouldn't work. As soon as a door is opened the house will be visible. Besides, the other doors and windows are all charmed to not open."

"Oh, of course. How about a portkey of some type?"

"No, that won't work either since none of us know how to charm something well enough to become a portkey."

"It can't be that difficult. We've seen Dumbledore do it several times." Harry thought for a few minutes about the one time he had been there when Dumbledore had made a portkey. The spell was easy enough but he had no idea how he had set the destination.

"Hermione, I'm not trusting Cassie to an untried portkey when we have absolutely no idea how to set one."

"Good point. That only leaves the portkey we'll be using tomorrow evening. That, obviously, won't work to get her to her house."

Ron gave a curse under his breath which made Harry turn toward the window and brought a reproachful glare from Hermione. There were now two more Death Eaters, both big and burly looking.

"I think they might be Crabbe and Goyle. They're both big and ugly. And I think they look a little like the two goons we know so well. What do you think, Harry?"

Harry stepped closer to the window, swallowed hard, nodded and then turned and looked at Cassie. He tried to give a reassuring smile but figured it probably made him look even sicker than he was already feeling. It was them, all right.

Ron turned to Harry. "Why are they here? Why all of a sudden do we have three Death Eaters right outside this place? They've never been here before, have they?"

Harry shook his head to answer Ron's question. "Because Ron, like I said before, people know when we do ma . . .," Harry glanced at Cassie and then continued, "when we do what we do. They obviously noticed when the two of you arrived by portkey. They came to see who's doing this at a place where it wasn't expected.

Cassie looked confused but Ron looked thoughtful. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I've heard the Death Eaters are trying to keep track of where every wiz . . . uh, one is so they know who they'll be fighting tomorrow. School has practically been in lockdown the last few days."

Harry nodded to Ron, cast a sideways glance at Cassie who was standing in the middle of the room looking worried and out of place. He walked back over to Hermione. He hoped that she had figured something out.

"Hey, how about my invisibility cloak? Cassie and I can get under it and slip out the front door and . . ."

"Harry! Now you need to think about it. If you opened the door, you would be invisible, but the house would still appear and they would attack us. We could make the house invisible again, but by then it might be too late. Of course . . . ." She was thinking hard, now. "Of course, you'd be gone and presumably safe and then Ron and I could try to fight them off but . . . ."

"No absolutely not, Hermione. I'm not leaving you two here to face them alone. That's just ridiculous." After another few minutes, though, he said, "What if all four of us went? Then, if they got in the house, we would be gone and . . . . Hey, we could all just stay at Cassie's until tomorrow!" To Harry, this seemed like a perfect solution.

"No, I don't think that's a good idea." Hermione was looking like she was on the verge of tears.

"Why not?"

"Two reasons, Harry. First of all, we don't know anything about the portkey Dumbledore made. It might only work from here although it's unlikely. But the main thing is this - you would be completely defenseless there with no guards at all." Harry was about to interrupt, saying that he had been at Cassie's house plenty of times and been safe there. Then he realized that the fact that Lucius Malfoy was hanging around on his sidewalk made things totally different.

Harry sat down in the easy chair and sighed in frustration. "You're right."

Cassie, who had been silently watching and listening with a puzzled look on her face said, "I don't know anything about this being invisible - I still have doubts about that - but why don't we just call a taxi cab? It can pull up and I'll run out and get in. What are they going to do with a taxi driver around?"

"Plenty!" said the other three at the same time. They looked at each other in surprise and couldn't help grinning -- even under the circumstances. Harry continued, "Cassie, they won't care if there's a taxi driver, they'd kill him too."

"Kill!" Cassie exclaimed with a horrified expression. "They would kill me?" But why would they kill me? They don't even know me."

Harry explained, "Cassie, it doesn't matter. If they saw you coming out of a Fidelius charmed house they would automatically figure you were with our side and they would kill you just for being here."

"Well, then. I say we call the police and tell them there are dangerous men outside."

"That won't work either. They would just kill the police as soon as they showed up."

Cassie had a horrified expression on her face. "Yes, but the police'd have guns."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other. Harry said, "Believe me, Cassie, police guns are no match for what those creeps have."

After a few minutes of silence, Harry looked at the other two and stood up, putting his arm around Cassie's shoulder. "I don't think there is a way to get Cassie out of here and home tonight." A look of relief crossed Cassie's face, followed quickly by a panicked expression.

"My mum said she'd call me tonight. I need to be home or I'm dead."

"Cassie, you really will be dead if we try to get you home tonight. I think your mum and dad will understand under the circumstances. Do you have the phone number to their hotel? Maybe you can call them instead."

"Well, just exactly what am I supposed to tell them? I don't think they will be too happy to hear there are vicious gangsters waiting outside of your invisible house to kill me if I should try to go home."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other and Ron just shrugged and grinned, "Your problem, mate."

"Thanks, Ron," Harry muttered, and then turned to Cassie. "Uh . . . well . . . I see your point. Well, on the positive side, you have a couple of hours before you have to call them. Hopefully you will think of something by then." Cassie just glared at Harry.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione. "We'll probably be safe in here. We need to set up a regular watch to keep an eye on them and make sure that they aren't doing anything too bizarre. And, just in case they do find a way in and are able to attack us, I think we should come up with a defensive plan."

"Harry," Hermione had that annoying tone she adopted when she knew she was right but didn't want to set him off. Harry braced for whatever comment she was about to make. "That's what's so great about a Fidelius charmed house. They can't see the place and they can't get in unless they are told how by the secret keeper. You know that, Harry."

Harry felt the blood go to his head and tried not to lose control of his temper. He knew more than most. "Yeah, well being in a Fidelius charmed house didn't help my parents, did it? They were still murdered."

Cassie gasped in shock. "Your parents were murdered? You said they died. I didn't realize they were murdered." She hesitated a moment and then asked, "Then the scar was from when they were murdered?"

Harry really didn't want to worry about all of this right now. He had enough problems to deal with. However, he realized it was about time Cassie knew the truth. He was tired of side-stepping questions, leaving out parts of stories and just plain lying.

"Yes, Cassie. My scar is from the night Voldemort murdered my parents and tried to kill me. And he's still trying. Fun life I have, isn't it?"

"Harry." Hermione took a step toward him and put her hand on his arm. He looked at it and then at her face. Harry could see worry in her eyes. "Harry, what happened to your parents won't happen to us."

Wormtail was your parents' secret keeper and he gave the secret to Voldemort willingly. Dumbledore would never do that. Ever. And . . .and, we won't go out. We'll keep the door closed and they'll never know we're here."

Harry thought for a moment and then nodded. He then looked at Ron and Hermione.

"It's my fault Cassie is here and in danger with the rest of us. We know what it means to be involved. She doesn't. She's not even a part of . . ." Harry searched for a way of expressing himself and settled on the less than satisfactory, ". . . our world."

Cassie snickered, "Oh, then you really are an alien."

Harry smiled a smile which quickly disappeared from his face as he contemplated what he was about to tell her. He turned again to Ron and Hermione.

"Cassie deserves to know the whole truth. No more hiding, no more lying."

"Are you sure, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"I'm sure." With that, Harry sat Cassie down on the couch next to Hermione. Ron finally pulled himself away from the window, closing the curtains as he also went over to the couch and sat down. Harry decided there was no easy way to do this. "Cassie, I'm a wizard."

Cassie smiled at Harry, "Oh, that's even better than some of the other stories you've given me. Are you going to stick with that?"

"Uh . . .yes, I am. Because, it's true. It really is." Harry continued, "And Ron is a wizard and Hermione is a witch."

Cassie turned to Hermione, "That's really rude, Harry. Hermione, I think you're really nice." Hermione rolled her eyes and Harry continued to flounder.

"Cassie, I'm serious. We are wizards and a witch. That's why I have had to keep so many things from you. We usually don't tell Muggles." Cassie stiffened a little when Harry said Muggle. He noticed and continued on. "Muggle is our name for people who are not magical. It's not an insult. It's just our name for people who don't do magic."

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, Cassie, I understand you're a little skeptical. Look," Harry pulled out his wand as he continued, "You've wondered what this is. I'll tell you. It's a wand. All three of us have wands." With that, Cassie's smile faltered a little and it was obvious she was thinking about what he had said. Finally, she smiled even more.

"Nah. You three may think they are magical wands or whatever, but that just isn't possible. Okay, I'll play along with you. The sticks really are magical and you three can do magic. Let's see some."

Harry turned a little red and cleared his throat. Well . . . you see, we can't do any magic right now. That's why Malfoy and the others are hanging around outside. They detected magic being done and came to see who it was and what was going on. That's why I haven't done any magic. We don't want to bring any attention to ourselves."

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Oh, Harry, I see. You are a wizard who usually does magic, but you can't exactly right now."

Harry thought desperately how he could prove to Cassie they were wizards. At the same time he was thinking of the irony of how he had tried for weeks to hide from Cassie his being a wizard and now he was doing everything he could to make her believe it. He suddenly thought of something. His cloak. That was magical.

"I know something that'll prove what we're saying. Ron," Harry said, turning to him, "where did you put my cloak?"

Ron looked around the room for a second. Then he got an odd expression on his face. "Oh, Harry. I left your cloak on the front porch!"



Harry gasped and ran to the front door window, followed by the other three. There it was. The cloak was lying on the front porch. Fear gripped Harry as he thought of the Death Eaters getting his father's cloak. He reached up to the first lock.

"I've got to get it before they do."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as she pulled his arm down, "Don't go out. They're not going to get your cloak. Remember, they can't see it because of the Fidelius charm. Before we go, we'll open the door, grab it and then go before they can get in."

"Okay, I guess." He thought for a minute and decided Hermione was right. "Anyway, Cassie, uh . . . well, it's an invisibility cloak. It makes people disappear."

"Uh, Harry," Cassie said with a bemused expression, "How can you be invisible if you can see the cloak?"

"Uh . . . good question. I don't know. It's just . . . magic." Harry thought to himself for a few moments as they once again went into the front room and sat down. Suddenly Harry had a brilliant thought. "Wait a minute. I have something that will definitely convince you." Harry ran into his bedroom. The painting of Sir Lionel was still facing the wall. Without taking the time to look at it, Harry grabbed the painting and raced back into the living room. He held it up facing Cassie, Ron, and Hermione with a triumphant grin.

"See Cassie. You don't have anything like this in the Muggle world."

Cassie looked at the painting with an odd expression that turned into wide grin. "You're right Harry. I've never seen a painting before." Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. Both of them were shaking their heads like they felt very, very sorry for him. They could see him heading on a collision course with disaster, but they couldn't do anything to save him. Ron was staring at the ceiling again.

Harry had a sinking feeling. He flipped the painting around and almost laughed. Sir Lionel was not there. "Uh, well, usually there's a guy here but he's apparently . . . Remember that day when we had

that huge fight?" Cassie nodded, looking like she was trying not to smile. "Remember how I was talking to someone? Well, it was this guy. See, wizard pictures talk and move and they can . . . ." She was laughing now, quietly, and Harry tried not to get too offended. He must really sound ridiculous. He smiled, too. "He comes back and forth, and if he's gone he's probably getting a message for me and then you'll be able to see him." Again, Ron and Hermione shook their heads.

"Harry, Dumbledore took Sir Lionel's painting down and locked it away. Sir Lionel won't be back."

They all sat and stared at each other for a few moments, Harry feeling very frustrated at the entire situation, Ron and Hermione less concerned. But no wonder, they didn't have crushes on the girl who now thought he was certifiable. Cassie cleared her throat, apparently feeling that it was up to her to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Um, so let's assume for a minute that you really can do . . . . magic. What sort of, uh, tricks can you do? Because, I mean, I've always wanted to know better magic tricks. I saw this magician once on television make Big Ben disappear and I thought that was pretty neat. I've always wondered how he did that."

Ron got a very offended look on his face. Being from a pure-blood wizard family, he took the comparison to Muggle sleight-of-hand tricks as a personal affront. "That was a magic 'trick,' Cassie. We actually do Magic. The real stuff."

"Oh." There was a small silence like she didn't quite understand the difference but was willing to put a good face on it. "Like what? What do you actually 'do?'"

Hermione, Harry, and Ron all looked at each other, and then they all started talking at once. "I can do a great summoning charm." "I can levitate anything." "I can put you in a full-body bind." "I can make a pencil box run around on little feet." "I once turned a rat into a water goblet." "I can make blue fire that you can hold in your hands." "I make a wicked truth serum." "I know how to read a crystal ball - well, sort of." (That was Ron.) "I can banish a boggart." "And I," Harry said

into a sudden silence, "can fly on a broom like I was born to do it - at least that's what everyone says."

"Fly on a broom?" She turned to look at Hermione. "Shouldn't that be your job?"

Hermione did not take offense at this, which Harry thought was big of her. "As little as possible," she said primly.

Harry was disappointed. There was nothing he or the others could say or do to convince Cassie and he realized it. They had spent enough time on this fruitless endeavor. "I'm sorry, Cassie. We really don't have any way to prove who or what we are. I guess you'll just have to . . ." Harry hesitated a moment and got a rather embarrassed expression on his face as he finished the sentence, "Trust me on this." Cassie chuckled good-naturedly, like she still thought they were playing a joke on her. But Harry continued, "Either way, you're going to have to stay the night here and then tomorrow we'll try to get you out of here and home." Cassie's smile faltered a little as she realized again the seriousness of the situation. Harry set the empty painting down and moved over to Cassie. He sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulder. "I'm sorry I got you into this mess. I'd do anything to get you safely out."

Cassie put her hand on Harry's leg and patted it a little. She forced a smile. "It'll be fine, Harry. I know it will. You're smart. I think you can figure something out."

Harry smiled at Cassie and then looked at Ron and Hermione. "Let's get down to business. Just pretend Cassie is a witch. We can't keep trying to have short conversations when she's out of earshot. Now, I'm sure a lot has happened at Hogwarts. Fill me in, okay?"

## Chapter 39

### While You Were, uh, Sleeping

At Harry's question, both Ron and Hermione looked at him and then at each other. Neither of them said anything for a long minute. Finally, Ron spoke up.

"Hogwarts is . . . strange, Harry. That's the only word for it, I'd say."

"Strange? Strange how?" Ron seemed unable to explain further, just opening his mouth and shutting it again. Harry had a churning in his stomach. He remembered how the year before Hogwarts had not seemed like itself because of Umbridge. He hoped things were not that bad. But it had only been three weeks. How bad could it be? Harry looked at Hermione, hoping that she could elaborate more.

"Strange how, Hermione?" For another long moment, no one said anything. Then,

"Well, I guess it's several things, really. First, of course, is the fact that you are, uh, were, uh, we thought you were . . . dead. It was strange being there without you, Harry." Her voice broke a little and Ron reached over and took her hand. Harry tried not to feel guilty but didn't succeed. "Anyway. We missed you, of course, terribly. And lots of people missed you." Harry snorted in response to this. He had friends there, of course, but he felt like most people at the school thought he was more bother than he was worth. He supposed he was, really. "I'm serious. People were . . . shocked, I guess, that it had finally . . . happened."

"She's right. Even people that normally didn't really care for you much were a little out of sorts."

"Yeah, people would look at either Ron or me and just start crying."

Ron laughed but it sounded forced. "I got so I was carrying around tissue all the time to offer the blubbing . . . ." He couldn't go on and he suddenly found another interesting place to study on the ceiling. "I guess we reminded people that you weren't there anymore, and I . . . ."

was starting to get a complex, Harry." He tried to take refuge in humor but Harry sensed the desolation of loss underneath it and looked away. He remembered what it was like to lose . . . well. He didn't want to go there. After a moment, Harry turned back to his friends but he was grateful for Cassie's sitting next to him on the couch. She didn't say anything but her hand was still on his leg and he reached down and grabbed it.

"Anyway, the first few days were kind of like . . . you had just gone away or maybe were in the hospital wing or something. We're kind of used to that so it wasn't so bad." Hermione had taken over the narrative. Ron didn't seem able to continue. "But then."

"Then, what?"

"They had a funeral for you."

"Oh."

"It was the worst thing I've ever . . . ."

Anger flared suddenly in Ron again and he stood up and started pacing. Harry thought he might possibly put his fist through a wall. He certainly wouldn't have complained.

"How could he have sat there? Sat there and let us . . . . He cried! We all . . . cried! And he could have fixed it, couldn't he?" Harry didn't need to ask who "he" was. Dumbledore. "I'll never forgive him for this, never!" Ron was fingering his wand, now, and Harry could feel the waves of frustration even from across the room. "You should have heard him, Harry! Going on and on about how brave you were and how . . . ."

Cassie interrupted and Harry jumped. He had forgotten she was there for a minute. "I bet it wasn't easy for him either, Ron." She spoke calmly but it didn't help. Ron just rounded on her.

"Fat lot you know about anything. You were here . . . . You were with him! You didn't have to imagine him . . . ."

Fortunately, Cassie knew how to defend herself and was not about to be defeated in this argument. "You're right! I don't know anything about these people or your school or anything. I only know Harry! And I know that some crazy person is trying to kill him and if this saves his life for real then it seems to me that it's worth it all! Tell me I'm wrong!"

Ron just stared at her for a minute and then, unexpectedly, he grinned. "You remind me a lot of my sister. You've got guts!" He sat down again by Hermione and seemed calmer, at least for a moment. "But I'm serious about not forgiving him."

"Ron, honestly." Hermione knew that Ron didn't mean it, not really. She just patted his arm. Another long silence filled the room as each of them grappled with their own thoughts. "Speaking of Ginny, Harry . . . ."

"Yeah?" Harry wasn't sure he wanted to get into this subject. Ginny. Oh, Gods. Their story was so complicated. But then, nothing was ever simple for him, was it?

"She didn't handle it well at all."

"Well, I guess . . . ."

"She told me that she just felt so bad about everything you two had said to each other the last time she had seen you. She said that she wished she could see you again and take it all back."

"Oh." They had fought. Harry couldn't even remember what had started the argument. Oh, yeah. He had asked her out on a date and she had turned him down. She had said something about the fact that he had finally woken up but now she wasn't interested anymore. He had accused her of lying. She had slapped him.

"I'm only telling you this because I know she'd want me to. Just in case . . . .Well, you know."

"Yeah." He knew all right. He knew exactly. In case he died, again, fighting Voldemort, again.

"She really loves you, Harry. She never stopped, you know."

He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice although he tried.  
"Funny way of showing it."

"Well, I think she was afraid, Harry."

"Afraid of what? Of me?"

"No. Afraid of . . . Oh, this sounds silly, but I'll just say it. . . Afraid that if she allowed herself to admit that she still loved you, you would reject her again. It's almost a conditioned response for her, now. And honestly, I can't say I blame her. She wouldn't be able to pass it off as a childhood crush anymore. She'd have to admit that she really . . . loves you and that you don't want her. She needed time to face that."

"But I told her that I . . ."

"I know. Look, I can't speak for her. You need to talk to her about this. I'm just passing on what she told me she would say if she could ever see you again. I won't mention it again to you."

Ron broke in, suddenly. "She had a breakdown."

"What?!" Harry almost jumped out of his chair and attacked Ron for daring to say such a thing about Ginny. It just couldn't be true.

"She took that dreamless sleep draught in the hospital wing for about a week. She couldn't come to the funeral. I think Madam Pomfrey was afraid it might be the end of her. She couldn't stop crying for days afterward. I think they finally offered to modify her memory of your fight, but she refused. After that, she pulled herself together. I guess that she was afraid they might do it without her knowing if she didn't get herself straightened out."

"Is she better now?" Harry couldn't believe this. Ginny was strong, a powerful witch, and she had, as Ron had said, guts. He couldn't imagine her all weepy and hysterical.

"She's still . . . .Well, the sun comes up every morning, doesn't it, Harry? Even when you don't want it to."

"Yeah, it does." Harry wanted to cry, desperately wanted to just break down into sobs. He had known that they were all hurting. He had known that they would miss him. But somehow, seeing their raw grief now made him remember all the agony he had gone through last year, well, and the year before that. His heart ached and it took every bit of self-control he had to force the tears back. His throat hurt but he ignored it. There would be time for this later. He could cry in bed tonight if he still wanted to. "So, is more weird stuff going on or is it just that my sparkling personality is gone?" He tried for humor. It failed but both Ron and Hermione forced a smile on their faces and pretended.

"No. Your funeral was like - I'm not sure how to describe it. It was like a dam burst or something." Hermione was thinking hard, now, trying to find the words.

"It was a dam bursting in reverse," Ron said. "Instead of a flood of things coming at you, everything left."

"Yeah, he's right. That's a good way to put it."

"I don't understand."

"Everyone was frightened. All the students, all the parents. The Daily Prophet had articles in every issue about how if Voldemort could kill Harry Potter than no one is safe. I remember one headline, 'His Power Is Unstoppable Now!' How did they really expect people to react?"

"But Hogwarts is safe - the safest place in Britain!"

"It's also a target because of Dumbledore. Let's face it, Harry. With you gone, there's only one thing that stands in his way and that is Dumbledore. He's almost certainly the next big target."

"But, what about the Ministry and the Order and everything?"



"Of course. The Ministry is a target and that's where the battle is supposed to take place tomorrow. Everyone is certain that You-Know-, uh, Voldemort wants to kill Fudge and take over there. That would make getting rid of Dumbledore a lot easier."

"What Ministry are you talking about?" There was fear in Cassie's voice and Harry released her hand to put his arm around her instead.

"It's nothing to do with your father, Cassie. It's the Ministry of Magic. It's the Wizard government."

"There's a Ministry of Magic? That's crazy!"

"That's exactly what I thought the first time. But it's true. Ron's dad works there." Cassie just shook her head rather thoughtfully.

"So what happened to the students? They left?" This seemed unthinkable to Harry.

"Uh-huh. Some immediately. I think even before exams were over." Hermione gave a little sniff in disgust and Harry had to chuckle under his breath. That was, in her opinion, an unforgivable thing.

"And since they've ended . . . Well, more are gone every day. Like I said earlier, the Death Eaters have spies in the school . . . ."

"Slytherins."

"It seems so. Most of them are still around. But anyway, they are trying to keep track of where all the people likely to fight tomorrow are right now. So, everything's just a mess. And that doesn't even take into account the missing teachers."

"The professors . . . . They're leaving, too?"

"Yes. It's unbelievable. I had to take two exams early - before I was ready -- because the professor wanted to leave. I'd have never believed that they'd desert the school that way."

"Is it defenseless, then?"

"Well, there's always been a few of the strong ones left, but even now . . . ."

"What about the ones in the Order?"

"Oh, they've been gone for ages!"

"What?!!!"

"They were some of the first to go."

"But where are they going? They must be helping with the Order."

"I don't know, Harry. They don't exactly check in with us when they take off. We just don't see them again."

"How do you know they aren't being captured?"

"Dumbledore never said anything. He just . . . ignored it, I guess. Oh, wait. Snape's still there."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Ron just shrugged at Harry's sarcasm.

"Just seems unlikely that it would be Order business, doesn't it? If the slimy git is still around?" Ron's opinion of Snape was very similar to Harry's. Harry still couldn't forgive him for last year. Logically, he knew that it wasn't his fault but in his heart he still hated the man. The feeling was certainly mutual.

"You'll be proud, though, Harry. The D.A. is still intact. No one has left. They want to stay and defend the school if it becomes necessary."

"Great. But school ends in just a few days and then they'll be going home for summer holidays." Harry had trained these students in defense against the dark arts as a way of rebelling against Umbridge. They were good at spells and curses and counter-curses now. They

would certainly be powerful in a fight. He had fought with them once before and they had proved to be very useful.

"But most of us don't think the school will be attacked then."

"Why not?"

"It's just an empty castle in the summer. What's the point of taking it?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Again, everyone sat quietly for a moment, just absorbed in their own thoughts. Harry just had one final question. "So, Dumbledore sent you to get me. That's fine. I just thought he would come himself, you know."

"Uh, yeah. I think he probably would have come . . . ."

"He probably planned to come himself. I think we were kind of his, um, back up plan."

"What are you talking about? It sounds like Dumbledore is . . . .Wait! He's not dead or anything is he?"

"We're not exactly sure where he is, Harry. He's just . . . . gone."

"Gone? Where did he go?"

"We don't know, Harry. I have to say it again. He didn't tell us."

"But then, how did you know where I was?"

"I think he realized it was possible that something bad could happen to him and so . . . ." Hermione noticed the panic on Harry's face and clarified. "I'm not saying that it has happened now. We're not really sure, it's just that. . . ." She stumbled around a bit and finally Ron broke in.

"We met with him every day at 4. At first it was just somewhere we could go and not be stared at by everybody else but then it kind of evolved into times when we talked about you. And then it started being sort of planning sessions, I guess, about the War. I, at least, felt

proud that he trusted us." His face hardened. Harry imagined that Ron felt like he had been played for a fool. Harry was quite sure this was not the case, but Ron had issues about this sort of thing. Harry tried to move the conversation forward.

"So this has to do with me because . . .?"

"Oh, well, about a week ago . . ."

"Was it only a week because I could have sworn it was Saturday?"

"No I thought it was Monday. I had just come from class, I think."

"I remember thinking that it would have been a good Hogsmeade day."

"DOES IT MATTER?" Harry caught himself quickly. He hated being in that yelling mode and had managed to avoid it so far in the insanity, but now he thought it was only appropriate.

"Oh, yeah, sorry." Ron picked up the narrative again. "About a week ago, during the meeting, he told us that if one time he didn't show up, then we were to . . ."

"We were supposed to wait one full hour and if he never came, by 5, then we were supposed to take your invisibility cloak . . ."

"And the address . . ."

"And the portkey . . ."

"And bring back whatever was there exactly 24 hours later."

"So he didn't tell you it was me?" This made sense to Harry now.

"No, not at all. Not even that it was a person."

"I kind of assumed it was some sort of, uh, weapon." Hermione nodded at Ron's words.

"So, tonight we went to the meeting and there was no Dumbledore and we waited and waited. Finally, it was 5 and we grabbed the portkey and came. We didn't know what to expect. We knew the place would be Fidelius charmed, of course. That was obvious from the parchment."

"I didn't think it was that obvious." Ron said truthfully. Hermione just raised her eyebrows.

"I just can't figure out why he didn't give us the password. Are you sure he knew it?"

"Well of course he knew it. I don't know how to set passwords. Do you?" Ron shook his head. They had long ago discussed that this was a bit of magic they didn't teach at Hogwarts, otherwise total chaos would result as students played pranks on each other's houses and on their professors by resetting all of the portrait passwords. That had been only two years ago. To Harry, it felt like he had aged 50 years since then.

"I know how. It's not that tricky." Both Harry and Ron rolled their eyes. "It's not, but I see your point."

"Maybe he forgot about the doorbell and the stupid password." Harry offered this up as an option.

"It seems to me. . . ." Cassie suddenly said, "that it was protection for Harry." Three sets of eyes turned to her in amazement. "Well, if you knew where to come but not what you would find, then that was a protection for him because you couldn't tell anyone else. And if someone else took the, uh, portkey to get here, they couldn't . . . see the house because they wouldn't have the paper with the address on it. And if they took the key thing and the paper and got here anyway, they still couldn't get in the house because they wouldn't know the, uh, secret password. Harry would have to recognize the person and let them in voluntarily. He would, of course, know you two and trust you. But if it had been someone else . . . someone that wasn't supposed to be here, then he just wouldn't open the door."

"You're bloody brilliant, Cassie. She's right. I'm sure she's right."

Harry felt a surge of pride at her observations. She was bloody brilliant. He tightened his grip on her hand and smiled at her. She smiled back. For a few moments, no one said anything else. Then Harry said, "So we leave tomorrow at 5, but where are we going?"

"We don't really know for sure. But I'm fairly positive it will be to the Ministry. That's where the fighting will be." Harry nodded. That made sense.

"Okay. We can talk more about this tomorrow. I'm sure everyone is tired. I know I am. We all need to . . . ."

Cassie suddenly jumped up. "It's almost 9! I've got to call my parents! I bet they've already tried to call me at home a few times. Oh, this is terrible! I still don't know what I'm going to say."

"Just tell them that you're being protected by three very strong wizards and that they don't need to worry." Ron thought he was very funny, obviously, and started laughing loudly. No one else even smiled. Cassie dug around in her purse for a minute and pulled out a piece of paper.

"So you're not sure if this phone actually works, Harry?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Great. I'm really excited to be the guinea pig. Now, you all be quiet because I'm going to have to talk fast and furious. If you're laughing in the background, it just won't work." She picked up the phone and dialed like she was scheduling her own execution. A moment later, "Hi, Mum. It's me."

## Chapter 40

"Hi, Mum. It's me."

Since Cassie was standing by Harry's desk in the living room, all three of them heard every word that she said. They didn't even pretend not to be listening and Harry admitted he was really curious to know what she had to say. Although they couldn't hear Ms. Robinson's questions, it was not too difficult to get the main idea of what she said from Cassie's responses.

"Yeah, I know. We just got here. Sorry. That's why I went ahead and called you instead." Harry suddenly realized that Cassie was going to pretend she was calling from her house. That way she avoid the whole being held captive issue, plus the fact that she was not supposed to sleep at his place. That was smart, but Harry hoped that she could carry it off. He personally didn't think she was that great of a liar. And her mother could read minds, he would swear. He had wondered at times if she had taken lessons from Snape or something.

"Well, we spent most of the day at Harry's house. Um, then we had dinner. Anyway, we just got back."

"Not really, it's only 9. My curfew's 10:30, remember?" Okay, so she wasn't happy they had spent so much time together today. Harry didn't really blame her for that. The original plan had been to take Cassie back to her house at a much earlier hour, like 6 or so. And he may have stayed there for a little while afterward while they, uh, said goodnight. But of course, things had changed rather dramatically.

"You're right, mum. I should have been home earlier . . . What did you and the boys do today?" Ooh, Harry had to give her credit for that one. Admitting that her mother was right would diffuse any argument and then there was the attempt to change the subject from what he and Cassie had done today to the safe topic of sight-seeing in France. Ron and Hermione were looking at him with undisguised interest. Probably because he was hanging on every word she was saying. He tried to assume a more disinterested posture and leaned back in his chair. Okay, it didn't work but he had least made an effort.

"What did we eat? Oh, nothing too spectacular. Just what Harry happened to have lying around the house." Harry leaned close to Hermione.

"Her mum's a bit of a health-food nut. She worries all the time about what Cassie's eating. I think she thinks I'm a bad influence."

"Gee I can't imagine why she'd think that." Hermione could sometimes be very sarcastic. Harry just shrugged. Cassie was talking again.

. . .so I'm just fine. You don't have to worry so much." She rolled her eyes at Harry and he smiled encouragingly at her. She was doing a great job. He had to give her credit for that. Suddenly, Cassie got a confused look on her face. "Last night? What about last night?" Then she relaxed as her mother kept talking to her.

"Oh, was that just last night? I guess it was. It seems like it was a lot longer ago. It was fantastic. Harry knows all sorts of things about constellations and stars and things." Oh, yeah. They had been stargazing the night before. How could he have forgotten? She was right. It seemed like it was more than a week ago that they had taken the Underground to the park and had spent a long time looking up at the various constellations. Of course, afterward, they had kissed for a while. Harry hoped that she wouldn't mention that to her mother. He turned slightly and noticed that Ron was definitely giving him a very amused look. Oh, great. He had figured out what Cassie was talking about. Harry had been completely sincere about the Astronomy tower being a hangout for kissing at school. Harry supposed that Ron thought that had been his main motivation.

"Yes. I saw Cassiopeia. It was beautiful. He showed me lots of other constellations, too." Harry definitely flushed under Ron's speculative gaze.

"I just showed her a few of the major constellations. She's named after. . . ." But he stopped whispering when she rolled her eyes again and spoke to her mother again.



"Oh, about midnight or so. But we had such a great time!" Hermione was shaking her head at Harry.

"I thought her curfew was before midnight."

"I got special permission, okay?"

"Obviously, her mother doesn't know you as well as I do."

"What's that supposed to mean, Hermione?" Harry felt his cheeks get hot. Ron was laughing and Cassie scowled at the three of them, putting her finger up to her lips.

"No, I'm all right, really. Harry was just . . . laughing at the, uh, television." Ron looked suitably contrite, but Harry knew that he was still holding in his laughter. Cassie continued with her mother. "Uh, we played chess during the morning." Ron looked interested at that but Harry just mouthed "Muggle Chess" at him, and he lost any interest in the subject. "I gave him the book I got him this morning. He liked it, I think. Then we watched a movie." Her face got distinctly pink during that part of the conversation and Harry's blush deepened. He remembered the interrupted movie very well. Ron and Hermione were looking between the two of them with kind of peculiar grins. Harry tried to think of anything except kissing Cassie. He hoped that his blush would subside but hers didn't. If anything, it got worse at her mother's next comment.

"No, nothing happened. Nothing. What makes you ask that?"

"Oh, sorry. I just need a drink of water." She cleared her throat and Ron started laughing again. Harry punched him on the arm but Ron could barely control himself. Cassie scowled heavily and mouthed "Shut Up" to the three of them.

"No, it's just that . . . Well, actually. Something did happen around dinner time . . ." It was obvious to Harry that she was going to continue and tell her mother about Ron and Hermione but apparently her mother had started yelling rather loudly. Cassie put the phone a little bit away from her ear and got a strange look on her face.

"Nothing like that! Mum! Honestly. Listen. No. Look. We've . . . No! We've been following the rules. We have. It has nothing to do with that." Her mother's voice suddenly quieted, and Cassie put the phone back to her ear. "I'm positive. It has nothing to do with the rules at all. It's just that . . . Well, his friends came tonight."

Ron and Hermione looked over and Cassie, suddenly realizing that now they were involved in this little family drama. "Well, two of them. His best friends. The ones he was telling me about earlier - Ron and Hermione." She turned her back on the three of them, apparently seeking a little privacy. Harry felt kind of bad for her and wanted to throw Ron and Hermione out of the room all together, but they didn't seem embarrassed at all and just sat there. "Yeah, they're very nice. I like them. I think they like me, too, at least a little bit." Her mother had apparently started firing off questions because for a few moments Cassie just listened with a strange look on her face. "What?" Then her expression cleared. "Our house? Oh, well, yeah. Of course they're at our house. We couldn't very well leave them behind, could we, when we came over here?"

"No nothing's wrong . . . It's just that . . . well, truthfully, they're sitting here listening to me and I . . ." Then her eyes widened a little at her mother's next comment. Oh, oh. Something was definitely wrong. "Um, okay, mum, I'll go in the other room. Yeah. I should have thought of that to begin with." She stood there quietly for a second, then made some rustling noises with the papers on the desk, and covered the mouthpiece with her hand. "Okay, Harry, you can hang up that extension, now. I'll be back out in a few minutes." She half yelled this, like she was calling down a hallway. All three of the friends started giggling at this and she gave them a definite disgusted look but continued. "All right, Mum, I'm by myself now. But honestly, there's nothing wrong at all."

Cassie's face suddenly turned bright red and Harry was afraid of what she was going to say next. It was as bad as he feared. "No, Mum, it's not like that. He wouldn't do that. He . . . he's not like that." Hermione just raised a speculative eyebrow and Ron bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud again. Great. Cassie's comments made him sound like he had no interest in doing anything with Cassie which was not true at all. But he didn't know how to defend himself to Ron without

further embarrassing Cassie. This was just terrible. It couldn't be worse, could it? It could.

"Well, Harry's not. He . . . likes you and Dad and he doesn't want to . . . do anything. Really. He doesn't." Okay. He hoped that she knew she was lying because earlier this afternoon he had definitely been interested in doing a lot of things. But then, on the other hand, he knew he didn't want either Cassie's mother or Ron or Hermione to know about exactly what had gone on this afternoon, so maybe it was better if they just thought he was not interested in that sort of thing. She continued on this same theme. "Yes, I already told you. We are. I mean we've kissed and stuff, but that's all."

Ron now started making exaggerated kissing motions with his mouth and just when Harry was tempted to punch him, Hermione reached over and did it for him. Ron assumed a hurt expression but his eyes were still laughing when they found Harry's again.

"We've just kissed. That's it." There was some comment and then, "I don't know why you don't believe me. I think you're getting paranoid." Harry thought that was a rather bold comment to make to her mother and apparently so did Cassie. Her eyes were big and worried, now.

"Look. For the last time. I am not upset. Okay, maybe I am, just a little bit upset, but not because of that!"

"Well, because his friends . . . well, his friends have come to, uh, get him." A short pause and then. "Yeah, you know. To take him back, uh, to school." Cassie bit her lip. "He's leaving tomorrow." There was apparently some comment from the other end.

"Well, of course, I'm going to miss him but that's not really the problem." Mrs. Robinson asked for a clarification, obviously, because Cassie continued "That's kind of hard to explain." Harry thought that sounded extremely familiar. This was where things were going to get tricky. He hoped that Cassie would just avoid any more discussion on this topic but he didn't get his wish. "Well, uh, things aren't really good back at his school and I think he might get, uh, hurt." Great. That made him sound like a big idiot. "No, he's not worried. At least I don't think so. His friends are, though." Harry was pretty distressed at this

turn in the conversation. He definitely did not want Cassie discussing this with her mother. He tried to catch her eye to tell her to end the conversation, but she ignored him. Well, he thought so, but then a moment later, she said,

"Well, look. I'd probably better go. I'm sure they're all thinking I'm pretty rude by now." Cassie listened to her mother for a few seconds. "Why don't I call you back in a couple of days. Meanwhile, don't worry about me. I'll be fine. If I need you, I can call." Then, suddenly, when Harry had just about relaxed completely, figuring that it was just a matter of the polite goodbyes and then the conversation would be over, Cassie said, "I don't think that's a very good idea, Mum." What wasn't a good idea? "I don't want to call him in here. It would be too embarrassing." She was biting her lip, obviously worried. Harry had a feeling he wasn't going to like this. "Somehow, I don't think it's just to say goodbye."

Cassie turned away again and her voice dropped, hoping that no one else could hear, but of course they could hear every word she said. "How could we do anything tonight when his friends are here?" Oh, no. Harry could tell the turn this conversation had taken. "Mum! That's a terrible thing to say. I don't think Harry would . . . well, honestly! You don't even know them." Apparently, all of the things Cassie was saying were having no effect. "This is . . . very embarrassing." Then a moment later, "I don't think . . ." Then, "Mum, I really . . . Fine. But I want you to know, I am not happy." She covered the mouthpiece again and waited a moment, supposedly so that she could return to the room where the other three were sitting. "Harry, my mum wants to talk to you."

Harry pointed his index finger at himself and mouthed, "Me?" Cassie nodded and Harry walked slowly to the phone as if he were going to the gallows. He had spoken to her before on the phone, just the day before and he liked Mrs. Robinson, he really did, but this was really uncomfortable.

"Hello?" Harry said in a shaky voice.

Mrs. Robinson answered, "Hi Harry. I understand you're going back to school tomorrow."

"Uh, yes."

"Well, I hope you have a very nice trip. I also hope you come visit us again the next time you're in London."

"Thank you."

"Cassie says that you two have been following the rules."

Harry had a moment of guilt as he thought of that afternoon and was silently happy that Cassie had had the presence of mind to shove him off of her. He gulped a little and answered, "Yes, Mrs. Robinson, we've been behaving ourselves."

"I hope you will continue to do so, Harry. Mr. Robinson and I like you very much. Please don't let us down."

"I won't, Mrs. Robinson. I . . . uh, wouldn't do that."

"Well, I am sure that tonight, since it will be your last time that you are with each other, you might feel like you can be a little more lax . . . ."

"My friends are here from school. We won't be staying very long."

"Mm. Well, I just want you to know, Harry, that I think you have been a good friend to Cassie and I'm glad that our family got to know you."

"Oh, thanks. I'm glad I've gotten to know you, also. Please tell Matthew and John goodbye for me. Maybe, I can send them presents from school." Harry didn't know what he would send them but he was sure that he could think of some candy or something that they would like. They were both really nice boys. Of course, both Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were nice also. And that was probably why Cassie was so wonderful. They had made this three weeks bearable. "I just wanted to thank you for accepting me, Mrs. Robinson. It made things a lot easier for me."

"Cassie mentioned that you were in trouble."

"Well, not exactly in trouble. I mean . . . I didn't do anything wrong or anything. There's just some trouble at the school. That's why I have to go back."

"But you're going to be okay? Because Cassie thinks you might get hurt."

"Well . . ." Harry crossed his fingers. He was going to be lying now. " . . . I think she is worrying a little bit more than necessary, but I appreciate her being concerned for me." He met her eyes and shook his head slowly. He tried to convey that this was a lie and she smiled. She knew.

"Okay. I feel better. I was worried about you, being all on your own and things."

"Thanks, Mrs. Robinson. I appreciate it. I'll be sure to write you a letter to let you know that I'm well."

"That would be nice. Now, again, don't let your goodbyes get too affectionate tonight."

"I won't. I promise."

"Thank you, Harry. Now, may I please speak with Cassie again?"

Harry numbly handed the phone back to Cassie who had been consciously avoiding the stares of Ron and Hermione. She smiled awkwardly at Harry and took back the receiver. Harry walked back over to the easy chair and sat down, trying not to blush too red at Ron's funny looks.

Cassie was once again assuring her mother there was nothing wrong and that she was over-reacting to think she had detected anything wrong in Cassie's voice. Finally, Cassie said goodbye and promised again to call her the day after tomorrow.

"Mum, I love you. And, tell Dad I love him, too. Okay. Bye."

Cassie hung up the telephone and all four looked at each other and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Cassie finally said, "I think she bought it."

## Chapter 41

### Bedtime

Cassie returned to the couch, sitting next to Hermione and close to Harry, who was leaning forward in the easy chair. She was still blushing a little and looked stressed from the phone call. Harry could tell she was embarrassed to have had such a discussion in front of the three of them. He leaned forward a little more, placing his hand on her leg and smiled reassuringly at her. He wasn't sure if the smile she attempted to return to him was indeed a smile or a grimace.

"I've only lied to my mum a few times. We usually tell each other everything. And this is kind of a big lie."

Hermione looked impressed. Ron just snorted. Harry squeezed her leg a little.

"You did a great job. It really is all for the best." Then, as if everyone had the same idea at once, all three of them turned and looked at the window. Harry finally got up, walked over, moved the now closed curtain aside and looked out. Malfoy had gone. However, the two hulking figures of Crabbe and Goyle still lurked in the shadows near the house. Harry's stomach churned as he contemplated the situation in which he had unwittingly placed Cassie. His thoughts were interrupted by Ron.

"Harry, I'm hungry."

Harry turned, planning to make a rude comment to Ron about his bottomless stomach, but both girls were nodding in agreement so he swallowed instead. "Well, I have some popcorn we could pop." Everyone seemed to like that idea and they wandered into the kitchen where Harry started preparing the popcorn. Cassie pulled what was left of the pizza and chicken fingers out of the refrigerator. She got four more plastic cups from the cupboard and then began searching for something to drink.

"Harry, do you have any iced pumpkin juice?" Ron asked as he looked over Cassie's shoulder into the fridge.



"No, sorry. Where would I get it? Muggles don't drink it." To which Cassie wrinkled her nose in agreement.

"Well, you're in London, mate. How about Diagon Alley?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned to Ron. "Ron, think about it. Harry is supposed to be dead. What do you think people in Diagon Alley would think if his 'ghost' showed up to buy pumpkin juice?" Ron blushed a little at her sarcastic tone.

"Oh, yeah."

Cassie looked puzzled. "What's Diagon Alley?"

"Well," Harry explained as he reached into the freezer and pulled two cans of apple juice out, "Diagon Alley is where wizarding people go to shop for, uh, wizarding sort of items."

Cassie chuckled as she took the cans from him and began to prepare the juice. "Oh, the wizard stuff again. I'm still not sure if the three of you aren't just having a good laugh at me. What sort of things do they sell there?"

"Um, well, . . ." Harry was trying to decide how to explain what sorts of things were sold in the multitude of shops that could be found in the Alley but Cassie laughed as she imagined the possibilities.

"Let me guess, that's where you can buy big cauldrons, bats wings, black cats, flying brooms and what not?" Cassie asked with a big grin on her face. She slipped the pan of pizza and chicken into the oven, chuckling a little.

Hermione scowled a little as Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry blushed a little.

"Well, yes. Actually, you can buy all that stuff there." Cassie's grin faded a little as she realized they were serious.

"Oh, I hope I didn't offend any of you." She looked especially at Harry who smiled in response. Hermione's face also relaxed into a smile.

"It's okay, Cassie. We don't blame you for being a little skeptical. It's a little hard to wrap your mind around the idea that there really is such a thing as magic. I remember when I first got the letter inviting me to Hogwarts. I'm Muggle-born and my parents are Muggles. We thought it was a joke at first and I was just going to ignore it. I went right to the library the day I got the letter and was very disappointed when I couldn't find any reference to Hogwarts."

"I can only imagine," Ron muttered with a grin. Hermione shot a scathing look at him but continued.

"So how did you, uh, realize it wasn't . . . made up?" Harry asked. "I mean, Hagrid delivered my letter personally and did a little magic for me, but I still didn't really believe it. But I was so desperate for some rescue from the Dursleys that I didn't really care. Then, of course, my aunt told me that my mum had gone to Hogwarts so that convinced me that the school existed at least, whether I believed the magic part or not."

Ron looked astounded. "Your Aunt Petunia told you that your mum went to Hogwarts?" Ron was well aware of how much the Dursleys hated everything to do with the wizarding world.

"Well, yeah. She was kind of in a rant about how much she hated my mum at the time, but she did tell me that she went."

"Oh, well that sounds a little more like her." Harry and Ron just grinned at each other. Cassie was looking confused about the entire conversation. Hermione answered Harry, though, and both boys sat down at the table to listen to her story as she and Cassie finished getting the snacks ready.

"Well, I guess it's fairly standard practice at Hogwarts that if they accept a Muggle-born, they send the standard letter and then about a week later, they send someone to talk to the family. I think he is just a ministry wizard whose job it is to go around convincing Muggles that there is such a thing as magic and to tell them how the money works,

how the owl post works, and what it's like to have a witch or wizard in the family. He can do a little bit of magic for you to convince you and he did some for us -- fairly minor spells I know now though at the time we were impressed." She dug some ice cubes out of the freezer and added them to the pitcher of juice that Cassie had finished. "But mostly, he tells you all the magic you have ever done in your life - inadvertently, you know. And, since I think all of us have done quite a bit by that age, I don't think it takes all that much to convince people." She poured four glasses of juice and handed them around. Ron took a tentative sip and grimaced, not too thrilled with the taste obviously. Cassie was looking through a cupboard for a big bowl for the popcorn but Harry wished she could have seen Ron's reaction to the apple juice. It is very similar to her reaction to the mere idea of pumpkin juice.

"Anyway, he also invited us to go to Diagon Alley and see for ourselves. Told us how to get there and everything. That place is pretty convincing - even if you are certain that the letter is a joke and the old wizard is just some nutter in a dress." Cassie placed the bowl of popcorn on the table as everyone grabbed hand fulls and began munching. In between mouthfuls of popcorn, Hermione continued.

"I remember the first time my mum and I went to Diagon Alley. We had a tough time finding the Leaky Cauldron - the pub hides the entrance to the alley from the Muggle side." She explained this for both Ron and Cassie's benefit. Ron had never entered that way, of course, and was looking a little confused about what the pub had to do with the rest of the story. "We walked by it at least five times until I noticed it. We went in and asked the pub owner if this was Diagon Alley. My mum stared around her like she was in some weird movie. Here she was in a business suit since she had come straight from her dental practice, and there were several witches and wizards looking like . . . well, witches and wizards."

She grinned at Cassie as Ron turned a little pink, stopped shoving popcorn into his mouth and stared at Hermione.

"And what is that supposed to mean, Hermione?" The last part of the question was accompanied by a few bits of popcorn, to which Hermione frowned and brushed herself.

"Well, Ron, you know. You've seen some of the . . . uh, guests at the Leaky Cauldron. Anyway, Cassie, my mum just about turned us both around and forgot about the whole thing. But the guy smiled. I'm sure he could tell from a mile away that we were Muggles. He's probably used to prospective students coming there looking as confused as we did. He took his wand and opened the way into Diagon Alley. As soon as I stepped into the alley, I knew this was my world. I felt at home. My parents have visited several times since and feel comfortable enough."

Cassie nodded thoughtfully as she ate a chicken strip and drank some juice. "So, you mean your parents aren't magical at all?" Hermione shook her head. "And they don't mind that you're a, well, a witch?"

"No, I think they're actually quite proud of it. It's something unique. It's just a little hard to explain to their friends and patients where I go to school, but we have a story we tell everyone."

"Does that happen a lot? I mean, to suddenly have . . ."

"What? Magic show up in a family?" Hermione finished. She looked at Harry who shook his head quickly before Cassie also looked up at him.

"Are you, uh, Muggle-born, too?"

"No." That's all he said. He knew what Hermione wanted. She wanted him to mention his mother, but he just wasn't in the mood to get into this whole thing tonight. He just didn't want to bring his parents into things. Cassie didn't need to know all this old past history. She already knew too much as it was.

Hermione covered for his rather brusque answer. "Harry's a full blood wizard and so is Ron. But there are several students in the school who are Muggle born. It's not uncommon, really. There are a lot who are half and half also. One parent is magic and one is not."

"Oh." Cassie nodded, like she understood although Harry knew she couldn't possibly understand all the implications of the various blood lines in the Wizarding world. He wasn't sure he understood it, even now. He thought for a brief moment about his mum and dad when they had been to school and that led to thoughts of his dad's friend, Lupin. Suddenly, it dawned on him.

"Hey, Ron. You haven't mentioned Lupin. How's he doing?"

Only silence met this question and at the look on Hermione's face, Harry's blood went cold. Not him, too. He couldn't be. Hermione shook her head. "He's not doing well, Harry. I think your, uh, death, was just too much for him. Remember how terrible he looked on the train? Well, he looks even worse now. I'm worried about him, truthfully. He didn't take Snape's potion last time that he should have and I think a good stiff wind would blow him away."

Harry grimaced. There really wasn't anything he could say to that. "Well, I guess I'll see him tomorrow. Maybe that will help a little."

Cassie looked at Harry. "Who's Lupin? He sounds like someone important to you."

Harry would like to have avoided this conversation as it dredged up painful memories. However, he had become very close to Remus Lupin and he cherished their relationship. It made him hurt to think Lupin was suffering. Just one more problem in a life filled with them. And now Cassie naturally wanted to know who this person was that obviously meant so much to Harry. He cleared his throat and then began.

"Remus Lupin was a close friend of my father's. He was a teacher at Hogwarts and really helped me. He's been there for me a number of times since. He, uh . . . has some health problems and, well, uh . . . has not been able to work too much and, if he doesn't take his medicine, it can be really tough on him."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Hoping once again to change the subject to something a little more enjoyable, Harry turned to Ron and asked, "Who won the Quidditch Cup?"

"We did!"

"Oh, that's great! Tell me about it."

"Well, first they were going to cancel the match completely but I protested. I knew you wouldn't want that. I thought we should play if possible. But the game was rescheduled."

"Why?" Harry wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to this when he saw the pained look that crossed Hermione's face. Ron didn't say anything at first.

"It just was." Harry looked at Hermione. Ron tended to try to avoid touchy subjects but Hermione usually would tell the truth.

"The day it was supposed to be, it was . . . well . . ." She stopped. Harry just kept looking at her. She took a deep breath and spit it all out at once. "Your funeral, okay? Now you know." So much for happier subjects. This just kept getting better and better. Harry decided that he definitely wanted to talk about the game. If Gryffindor won, then something good had to happen and they could get away from this dreadful discussion of these morbid topics.

"So what happened during the actual match?" Harry turned back to Ron. As captain of the team, Ron was in a far better position to talk about the actual play than Hermione, who had once called a Wronski Feint a Wonky-Faint, of all things.

"We had to beat Ravenclaw by 180 points if we wanted to take the cup."

"Yeah, I remember we talked about that before . . . I left."

"Whoa! 180 points. That seems like a huge score. What kind of a game is this Quid thing?" Cassie was looking from one of them to the other expectantly.

Harry smiled. "Quidditch! It's the best game in the world, Cassie!"

"It's a wizard sport." Hermione elaborated.

"We play on brooms - 50 feet in the air!" Ron gushed.

Cassie frowned. "Okay." Harry didn't quite understand why she seemed upset about this, but he didn't want to pursue it. He was more interested in hearing how the game went.

"Who played Seeker?"

"Ginny, of course. She was really our only choice, wasn't she?" Harry nodded. "She was upset before the game. She cried all the way until it was time to get on the brooms. Then she played like a woman possessed. She played for you, Harry. I know she did. She caught the Snitch in 25 minutes flat. Then she cried for another three days. It was after that she finally got herself together. We had a score of 200 after her catch. They only got one score - which was a stupid mistake by me, may I add. So, we won and beat the Slytherins by 20 points to take the cup!"

"That's fantastic! I wish I had seen it." Harry and Ron were about to launch into a more detailed analysis of the game when Cassie yawned. She hurried to cover her mouth, looking chagrined at being rude. Harry glanced up at the kitchen clock and gasped! It was after 11. No wonder she was tired. "We better get to bed, I guess. It's really late."

Hermione nodded in agreement as she too gave a wide yawn. "So, Harry, where can we sleep? How many beds do you have?"

Harry gulped at that question. "Just one. I forgot. It's a fairly big one but it's obviously not going to work for all of us." He was glad he had just done the laundry the day before because at least his sheets were clean.

"Well, I'll just do up some cots really quick. . . ."

"No! Don't forget, Hermione."

"Oh, yeah." She had a slightly worried look now. "What are we going to do?"

"Um, well I think that you two girls can take the bedroom so you can have some privacy and Ron can have the couch and I'll, uh, sleep in the armchair." No one looked very happy at that statement and Harry didn't blame them. The chair was not very comfortable even for sitting. Trying to sleep in it would be basically a joke. Of course, he didn't really expect to get a whole lot of sleep tonight no matter where he tried.

Ron spoke up first. "That couch is not going to work for me, Harry. It's too short, I'm sure, for me to actually lay down and besides that, it's lumpy. And I can't even use my wand to make it a little softer." He was almost whining and Harry was just about to give him a stern look when Cassie spoke up.

"I didn't think it was that lumpy." Three pairs of eyes suddenly snapped to her face. Her color flushed up into her cheeks and her hands flew up to cover her mouth. "Oh, I didn't . . . I mean, I . . . Just from sitting, it doesn't seem so bad."

Two pairs of eyes left Cassie's face and went to Harry's. He blushed bright red, also, and Ron got a sly look. "Hmmm. Not that lumpy, eh? Well, well. . . ." But before he could continue, Hermione interrupted.

"Harry, although Ron is being a bit of a prat about things, the fact is, uh . . ." and now her face flushed red. "We're kind of used to, uh, being together at night." Now three pairs of eyes snapped onto her face but she straightened her shoulders and glared at Harry. "I don't mean that! I just mean, well, we've kind of fallen asleep on the couch together every night since you left. And . . ." Ron flushed a brighter red than Harry had at this statement. "I'm used to it now. And tonight I don't want to be apart from him."

"You've slept on a couch in the common room every night for three weeks?" Harry was amazed. He had spent a night or two on the common room couches but this was a little much. "Doesn't



McGonagall give you a bad time about that? I'm surprised she lets you. I mean, she would hear about it from the elves. . . ."

Ron kind of grimaced. "She actually hasn't said anything about it. But then, we've basically been able to get away with murder lately. She just looks at us and starts crying. All the teachers do that. Well, okay, not Snape. He just glowers at us even more."

"Well, then, um . . . You two can take the bedroom. I'm not even going to touch that. Cassie can have the couch and I'll still get the chair." Hermione kind of glared at him but then gave a sort of half-smile.

"Thanks, Harry."

"Yeah, uh, thanks." Ron flushed a little again. "But I guess we'll need pyjamas, then, or something. . . ."

Harry bit his lip. "I don't have anything besides my own pyjamas. I'm sorry."

Suddenly, Hermione let out a curse word. Ron and Harry looked at her funny. Hermione never cursed. She flushed a little at their surprised expressions. "I brought my own."

"What?" Ron looked extremely surprised at this. "Why would you do that?"

"Well, unlike you, Ron, I thought ahead. Dumbledore told us we'd be gone for 24 hours and I figured we would be sleeping somewhere, wherever it was that we showed up. I've been carrying these around for over a week."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag. Both Harry and Ron burst out laughing when they saw what she had in her hand. Cassie just looked confused. She bent close.

"Those are really cute little, uh, doll clothes."

"They're not doll clothes." Hermione was now holding her head in her hands. "They're my clothes."

"She shrunk them." Ron was practically rolling on the floor, now. "She shrunk them and now she can't un-shrink them 'cause we can't use magic." Harry was chuckling too, mainly at the combination of Ron's extreme amusement, Hermione's extreme frustration, and Cassie's extreme shock. Ron grabbed the bag out of Hermione's hand and peered closely at it.

"Oh, yeah! I recognize your bathrobe." He laughed harder. "And you brought, what . . . Are those slippers? And a pillow? You brought your own blanket? .And I see that for tomorrow, you brought . . ."

"Never mind!" Hermione snatched the bag out of his hands again before he could discuss anything else she happened to have in there. "It doesn't matter now, does it? It's all useless. Anyway, Ron, I wouldn't have expected you to have thought this through. So I'm not surprised you didn't bring anything."

It was obvious to Harry that Hermione was really embarrassed about how her "little" plan had turned out and she was just sniping at Ron to cover up for it. He decided that he should hurry and change the subject before things escalated to all out fighting. He supposed that their new-realized romance had not changed the basic dynamics of their relationship. They both seemed to like it the way it was. He sighed. "I do have some T-shirts that you girls could wear to bed. I suppose they'd be kind of like, uh . . . nightgowns."

Both Hermione and Cassie flushed at this statement and Harry thought that they really needed to all get into bed and asleep soon before they all just turned a permanent red color. Discussing the intricacies of beds, sleeping, pajamas, etc. was getting to be darn embarrassing. Having company stay overnight was more complicated than he would have imagined. It was Hermione who declined his offer although Cassie nodded her agreement. "I don't think that's a really good idea, Harry. They would probably, uh, you know, uh, creep up and since Ron and I . . . Well, since we're going to be . . . Oh, Harry! I just think I'm going to stay in my clothes."

"Me, too." Cassie echoed. Then she smiled at Harry and said, "I'm pretty sure that wearing nothing but a T-shirt in front of you would be

against the rules. It would be worse than a nightgown." Harry smiled back. She was definitely right.

"I think I'd like to hear more about these rules, Harry." Ron teased, clearly on the verge of laughing again.

Harry scowled a little. "No, you wouldn't. It's none of your business. So don't ask." He looked around at his three guests. "Well, all right then. If you are all staying in your clothes, then I guess, so am I. Um, I guess we should probably take turns in the bathroom. I've got . . . oh, no."

Hermione apparently was able to follow his train of thought better than everyone else, because she cursed again. "I can't believe this. I could have brought it full-sized. It's not going to do me a bit of good, now."

"What are you on about, Hermione?" Ron snapped.

"A toothbrush! I have a now very miniature toothbrush and Harry doesn't exactly want to share his!" Everyone shuddered at that thought. Ron scowled.

"You would think a magical house could provide these sorts of necessities. I can't believe they only gave you one."

"They didn't even give me one, Ron. I had to buy my own. The only thing that came with this house is the furniture. And I swear some of that was left over from when they built Hogwarts! And, no, strangely enough, when I was shopping, I didn't think to stock up on toothbrushes, pyjamas, and the like for possible future guests!"

Ron stomped around the kitchen for a minute, growling under his breath. "Look, Harry. Just let me do one spell, just one! I could whip up some toothbrushes and pyjamas for all of us with just one spell. We'd all be a lot more comfortable if we had some things like that."

"No, you look, Ron. We've got at least two Death Eaters practically camping on our front step from a simple portkey. We cannot risk anything else. This plan has been in the works for more than three

weeks and my life has been miserable not to mention a lot of other people's -- including yours may I add -- and I'm not going to have it all have been wasted. So you'll just have to buck up! I promise you no one is going to have their teeth rot out just because they miss one night of . . . Oh, I get it. That's really not what you're worried about, is it?" Ron tried to look shocked at what Harry was implying but he failed miserably. Hermione looked between the two boys with confusion.

"What are you talking about? What else would he be . . . ?" Cassie muttered something under her breath to Hermione that Harry couldn't hear but Hermione turned absolutely bright red. "You don't have to worry, Ron Weasley, because with the way you've been acting in the last few minutes, my kissing you should be the least of your concerns!" And she stalked out of the kitchen, head held high. Ron followed after her, stammering apologies.

Cassie laughed and turned to Harry. "I like them but they are a little high strung. Are they always like this?"

"Ugh! Yes, basically. Even giving them some credit that they are a little stressed with the Death Eater thing and their thinking I was dead and everything, this is pretty much how they are all the time." He opened his arms and she slipped into them. He tucked her head under his chin. "I'm so sorry about all this. I didn't mean for you to get trapped here like this with us or anything."

"I know." They stood there for a few minutes longer before Harry felt it was safe to follow Ron and Hermione. He found them in the living room, arms around each other, doing something he had never seen them do. They were kissing each other. Really kissing. He cleared his throat loudly and they broke apart and met his eyes. Harry was pleased to note that neither of them blushed.

Hermione suggested using the corners of wash cloths as makeshift toothbrushes which seemed to work fairly well for them although they all looked jealously at Harry when it was his turn to go in and brush his teeth because they knew he'd have a legitimate actual toothbrush.

Ron and Hermione were already in the bedroom when he was finished getting ready for bed and he stepped in to wish them a goodnight. It seemed strange, somehow, leaving them there together. He was used to always being in the same room as Ron and there was definitely no Hermione then. He stammered a rather embarrassed goodnight to them and stepped to the door when he was suddenly suffocated in a very big hug from Hermione. "Oh, Harry. I just still can't believe you're alive. I keep pinching myself to make sure this isn't a wonderful dream." She started crying suddenly and Harry wasn't quite sure what to do with her. Then Ron was there, peeling her off Harry and holding her against his own chest as she sobbed. Ron met Harry's eyes. "I . . . I'm glad, Harry, that it was all just pretend." And then he punched Harry in the arm and Harry bore the ache without complaint, because he knew that it encompassed all the feelings Ron just couldn't put into words.

Harry wasn't sure whether to shut the door or not. He stood awkwardly in the doorway for a few seconds, looking at the two of them, wanting to look away from the intimate moment but unable to. Hermione finally looked up and smiled a watery smile at him. "Just leave the door open, Harry. Otherwise, it would just be too strange." Harry stepped into the hall and suddenly felt overcome. He went into the bathroom and shut the door, sat down on the edge of the tub, and cried. It took him several minutes to compose himself. His feelings were such a mass of confusion at that moment, that he wasn't sure exactly why he was crying. He was so happy to see Ron and Hermione but their arrival meant that he would be leaving Cassie and he wasn't happy about that. He was also, if he let himself think about it, quite worried about the Death Eaters on the sidewalk. Then, of course, there was the upcoming battle and all that would mean. But finally, he wiped his face on a towel and opened the door.

Cassie was still standing in the middle of the living room where Harry had left her quite a few minutes before. She was nervous, obviously, twisting her hands in a way that Harry had never seen until today. "Hey."

She looked up at him. "Hey, yourself."

"I brought you a blanket and a pillow."

"Okay." She didn't move.

"Are you worried I'm going to attack you or something?" Harry felt strangely about the way she was acting. He wanted to comfort her, of course, but he felt somehow offended that she was so uptight. She should know by now that he would never hurt her.

"No. It's not that. It just seems, I don't know, sort of strange."

"Yeah." Harry suddenly felt terrible for his brief frustration with her. She should be home in her own bed. No, she should be with her family in a whole different country. Far away from this whole disaster. But no, because of him, she was stuck in a strange house, her mother had no idea where she actually was, she had no idea when or how she was going to get home, and she had to sleep on a lumpy couch. All in all, she was holding up very well. He shouldn't complain. At least she wasn't hysterical.

Finally, she moved and sat awkwardly down on edge of the couch. Harry walked over to her and squatted down by her. "Let me take your shoes off for you, okay? You'll be more comfortable." She nodded, and Harry removed her shoes, trying really hard not to think about what had happened the last time he had taken her shoes off. He stood up and walked to the window to look out. Nope, still there. Of course. He wasn't surprised. He felt her next to him and turned his head to see her standing there.

"How come they haven't gone home? They can't be too comfortable, can they?"

"Oh, they're fine. They have no problem using magic. They've probably used a mild warming spell to avoid the coolness of the evening, whipped up something to eat and drink, and probably even used some sort of spell to soften the sidewalk up a little bit. They won't leave now until morning. Hopefully by then, they'll give up and think that whoever used the portkey is long gone by now. But, who knows? We'll figure out something to get you home."

"Do you really believe in this magic stuff?"

"What? Oh, yeah. I believe it because I've done it and I've seen it. It's not surprising to me that you're a little hesitant. It's okay." She moved away from him, then, and he continued to stare out at the darkness for a while. When he finally turned away, she was laying down on the couch, the blanket pulled up to her chin. He smiled at her and got himself settled in the chair. "Are you okay?" She nodded. He turned off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. "Goodnight, Cassie. Even though I'm sorry that you got stuck here by Malfoy and everything, I'm glad that you're here with me."

"Yeah, so am I, I guess. It's been, uh, interesting."

Harry stared into the darkness for a while. He knew he would not get any sleep tonight. He could hear Ron and Hermione's voices from the other room, soft and indistinct. They weren't sleeping either. But that wasn't surprising. They would be fighting tomorrow, along with him and whoever else was going to show up for this. He imagined that they were as nervous as he was. He sighed deeply. It was going to be a long night.

## Chapter 42

### Night before Battle

#### In, and About, the Darkness

Harry had sat there for about 20 minutes staring into the darkness. The soft murmur of voices from the bedroom was very calming and despite himself, he felt like he might possibly drift off. But then Cassie moved on the sofa and he was instantly awake again.

"I'm cold, Harry." He was surprised. He had given her a fairly warm blanket and she had all her clothes on, but maybe she just slept cold. He thought about giving her the one he was using but that would leave him without one. Not that the house was that cold, but he needed something over him as he slept.

"I'll go get you another one from the bedroom closet. They aren't asleep yet."

There was a long moment of silence. "I don't think that would help."

"What about that hot water bottle we used earlier for Hermione?"

She didn't answer for a few seconds. "Yeah, that might help a little. But it's a lot of work."

"That's all right. I wasn't sleeping anyway. Where did we put the stupid thing?" He got up from the chair. "I guess I better turn on the light. I think it just got put down on the . . . floor." When he turned on the light, he looked at Cassie first. She was very pale. He went over and knelt down by her, taking her hand in his. It was like ice. "Are you all right?" She shook her head rather decisively. "Are you sick?" She shook her head again. Suddenly, a thought crossed Harry's mind. "You're frightened, aren't you?" She didn't move for a minute but then her eyes met his and he saw the terror in them. He wasn't really surprised that she was frightened. He was scared, and he knew what was going on. "I don't blame you. I'm frightened for you, too. This chair is abysmally uncomfortable anyway. I'll come lay on the floor next to you, okay?" She nodded a little.



He retrieved the blanket and a rather small flat throw pillow from the chair. He turned off the light and a few minutes later was stretched out on the floor next to the couch. He realized rather quickly that uncomfortable as the chair was, it was better than the floor, but now he wasn't sure what to do. She was still wide awake, he could tell by how stiff she was holding herself, and he didn't want to get up and leave her. "Do you feel better?"

"Not really." Oh, great. He really didn't know what to do now. Maybe she would eventually settle down and go to sleep anyway, even if she was frightened so maybe if he just stayed there and held her hand she would . . . then he heard the soft sob. He sat up and reached for her shoulder but she had turned her head into the pillow and he found her back instead. He rubbed her back gently, feeling each tremor as she sobbed into the pillow. After a few minutes, she stopped and rolled onto her side again. Harry moved his hand off her and brought it back down to his side. They spoke very quietly, not wanting to wake Ron and Hermione.

"Try to get a little sleep, at least, Cassie. And don't be frightened. I'll make sure you get home tomorrow before we leave."

"That's not what's scaring me."

"Oh. What is, then?" He hated to sound stupid, but he honestly couldn't think of what else could be bothering her.

"Everything, I guess. I mean, you three seem to really believe in this magic stuff." Harry bit back a retort. "But, Ron was saying something about fighting this Voldemort guy, but he didn't mention using m . . . m . . . magic on him (another soft sob) and I don't understand why you would get involved in some war if you're trying not to get killed. I'm scared you'll get hurt and I'll never see you again." She ended the sentence on a breathless half sob.

Harry knelt there next to her for a long minute and then he felt as much as saw her start shivering. It was obvious she was really upset and it wasn't because of the cold. "Cassie, would it be all right if I . . . sat with you tonight?"

"What?" Her voice was soft but Harry thought he heard a note of hope in her response.

"If I just sat on the couch and you sat by me and we talked?"

"I'd like that." He stood up and grabbed the blanket. Forget the stupid little pillow. She sat up to make room for him. He thought about just sitting with his feet on the floor and having her sit next to him but she was still shivering and he decided that she really needed him to hold her. He remembered how they sat when they watched movies (it seemed like years ago rather than hours) and he swung his feet up onto the couch. She quickly scooted back over to him and snuggled into his arms. She was cool and still shaking slightly, but he quickly arranged both blankets around her and settled down into the corner of the couch. He stroked her hair softly with his right hand. His left hand found hers under the blanket, and he entwined their fingers. Her shivering stopped a few moments later, and Harry thought that he might actually be able to sleep tonight as well, after she finally drifted off. "Thanks, Harry. This is much better." It was definitely better. He was just glad that her mother was nowhere in the country. Otherwise, he'd have worse things to fear than the Dark Lord.

Neither of them said anything for quite a few minutes and he could feel her relax as her breathing slowed. He thought that she might actually be asleep, but then she spoke. "I've been thinking, Harry."

"Mm?"

"When you told me about Voldemort trying to kill you and about how his gang of followers is trying to kill you, too, I think you left out some major parts of the story."

"Well, I tried to get the important parts." He laughed softly into her hair.

"Now that you've sort of spilled the beans about your being a . . . wizard, um, . . . and all, maybe you could tell me the rest because I still don't understand some things about it. I heard everything Ron and Hermione told you earlier but a lot of it didn't make sense to me. I

kept thinking that if I just kept listening, maybe I would understand it, but I still don't."

"I don't blame you. It's sort of . . . well, complicated." She laughed this time and her fingers tightened in his. "Plus you're coming in to the middle of a very long story."

"Ron said I was brilliant so I'd like to try to understand." Harry sighed. It was so difficult to explain. Where did one start trying to explain the very tricky tale of his relationship with Voldemort? Especially to someone with no knowledge of magic or the Wizarding world. He took another deep breath. "Is it that difficult?"

"Actually, yes. I still don't understand parts of it and there are some things that no one understands. I don't even think Voldemort understands it and he's the . . . Well, I'll try to explain but if you don't understand something, just ask." She nodded and Harry started.

"Voldemort is, as you've probably already guessed, a wizard. He is very powerful and also very evil. Many years ago, I'd say about 20 or so, he was well on his way to taking over complete power of the entire world. And I don't just mean the wizards and witches. I think he also was terrorizing Muggles - just average people, you know?"

"Why?"

"I don't really know. I guess like any dictator he craved power. I do know that he wanted everyone to be afraid of him. And he was pretty well on the way to accomplishing that. He made people afraid to oppose him by using, uh, torture and fear and death. He killed people that tried to stop him. Basically these were the same tactics used by bad guys everywhere. The only difference is that he wasn't using guns and prisons and things. He was using magic . . ."

"There was nothing that could stop him from using magic?"

"He was using pretty strong magic. Dark magic. Not too many people could fight him."

"I don't understand that."

"Yeah. Well, let me explain it this way. If you have a gun and I have a gun and we both are pretty decent shots and we take aim at each other and shoot, well, the bullets have a pretty good chance of killing both of us. Because the gun is a mechanical device that just shoots where it is pointed. But magic isn't like that. It's the power behind the spell that makes the difference. So, if a really powerful wizard and a not-so-powerful wizard were to, uh, cast the same curses on each other, well, one might kill but the other one just wouldn't be effective. Uh, I've cast spells on people that just haven't done anything because I didn't have the 'strength' behind it."

"Oh. I guess I can understand that."

"Anyway, so he was pretty much the most powerful wizard in the whole world at that time and there wasn't much that anyone could do to stop him. People were trying. There was a small group of people . . . that were fighting him, trying to learn his weaknesses, tricking him, killing his, uh, Death Eaters, etc. But they weren't making much progress. At least, that's what I think. This was about the time I was born so I only know what I've been told by other people."

"They were really brave, then?"

"Very brave. My parents . . . were part of it. After I was born, they went into hiding. I'm not really sure why. I think they were trying to protect me."

"Oh, they were hiding in an invisible house like this one. That's what you were saying earlier."

"Yeah. But the protection didn't work because . . .because someone, someone . . ." Harry heard his voice catch. He wasn't sure he could keep going. This was harder than he thought it was going to be. Cassie didn't say anything but just waited for him to compose himself. " . . .someone who was supposed to be their friend sold them out to Voldemort. And he came to their house. I was one year old. And he came to their house and he killed my dad first." Harry was speaking mechanically now, trying to get it all out before he couldn't speak anymore, "My dad was trying to protect my mom and me. He tried to

fight Voldemort all by himself but he couldn't. . . . and Voldemort killed him. Then he found my mum and me." Harry could still, three years later, hear the voices as they had replayed in his head when the Dementors were near. Voldemort had told him mother to leave, to get out of the way, but she . . .she hadn't. "Anyway, he just wanted to kill me and told her to move but she wouldn't and so he killed her, too. And then he tried to kill me." He took a deep breath. "But when the spell hit me, I didn't die." Her breath caught and Harry knew she was waiting for more. "I didn't die. I got this, uh, scar instead. And somehow the spell bounced back on him and he almost died."

"What!?"

"No, it's true. I know it sounds strange. No one else can really explain it either. But everyone thought he died instead of me. They called me, well, they still call me The Boy Who Lived."

"That's incredible! So your scar . . ."

"Yeah. It's easily recognized, needless to say. I'm probably one of the most famous people in the world to wizards."

"Oh. That explains a lot of things, doesn't it?" Harry thought that was a very profound statement. "But he wasn't dead, obviously."

"No. He wasn't dead. He had been trying to become immortal, you see, and I think that he had done enough of that sort of magic that he was almost impossible to kill. Anyway, for 10 years almost everyone thought he was dead and then . . . . he figured out to come back, how to get a body again."

"You're kidding? He'd been . . . a ghost?"

"Not really a ghost. I'm not really sure how to explain what he was. He was like a . . . force. An evil force, but he had to live in other bodies."

"That's not possible, Harry."

"Yeah. That's what most wizards think, too. But whatever you think, that's what he did. He lived in animals for a while, hiding in the dark places of the world. Then he finally, uh, possessed the body of a, um, professor at my school, at Hogwarts and . . . that's when he started trying to figure out how to kill me." She didn't interrupt here, although he could feel her shaking her head against his chest. "Anyway, two years ago, he managed it. He got another body." Somehow that simple sentence did not convey the absolute horror of that night. The terror, the fear, the certainty that death was coming for him like it had for Cedric, the rush of wind as the green flash of light, Oh, God! He swallowed hard. "And now he's got his old group back together and he's trying to get back to where he was before in strength and power. And he's also trying to get rid of me."

"For revenge?"

"Well, I imagine that's part of it. But also . . . Well, this is where it gets sort of . . ."

"Don't say complicated, please."

"No, I was going to say . . . um, tricky?"

"Tricky?"

"Well, yeah. No one is quite sure about this part."

"I'm not quite sure about any of it."

"I can understand that. You probably think I'm insane and I don't blame you. I really wish I was. Then they could lock me in a nice padded cell and I could eat Jell-o and applesauce for the rest of my life." Oh, where had that come from? He swallowed the bitterness in his mouth and forced a smile. She wouldn't be able to see it, but maybe she could hear it in his voice. "Anyway, somehow, we're, uh, linked."

"Linked! You and Voldemort?"

"Yeah. When he cast the, uh, killing curse on me, he put part of his power into me. Somehow, he, uh, . . . made me like him. We're connected. I feel his thoughts a lot of the time and when he's near me the scar hurts and he can sometimes feel me and he's used me sometimes to . . . ." Oh, God! He was not sure he could continue with this. Trying to explain the depth of this connection was much harder than he thought it was going to be. He floundered around in his brain desperately for some way he could hurry this up. This was terrible. He felt the tears, then, building up in the back of his throat. Oh, Sirius! Voldemort had used him and Sirius had been killed! It was all his fault! His stupidity had killed his godfather! The wound was suddenly opened again and Harry thought he just might die from the agony. Finally, he couldn't hold it back anymore and he felt the hot tears gathering in his eyes and they started down his face. He tried to keep from sobbing openly, but he knew that she felt it anyway. She didn't say anything, just turned around his arms, laid her head against his chest, and let her arms slip around his waist. She just held him as he cried and he thought that it had been a long time since anyone had done anything as nice for him. He had no idea how long he cried he just knew that when he was done he felt a lot better, despite the embarrassment and the sticky face and the fact that his shirt was damp. She kept her arms around him for a long time afterwards and finally he was able to speak again.

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be. I'm not."

"I don't usually . . ."

"Yeah. I bet."

He cleared his throat. "Anyway. Somehow, to make this just as basic as possible, I am, I guess, the only one who can fight him because somehow my power and his are . . . equal."

"Say that again, Harry."

"Well, I don't know. I'm not that powerful of a wizard, really, I don't think. But there's something about me that he has to get rid of. He has to, if he wants to survive."

"Oh."

"Like I said it's kind of tricky."

"So, you have to fight him. You're the only one that even has a chance to kill him."

"Yeah." The prophecy Dumbledore had told him about last year flashed through his head as it always did when any discussion of Voldemort was happening and he briefly considered talking to her about it, but he dismissed the idea. He had never even told Ron or Hermione. He didn't like to talk about it all.

"You're still pretty young."

"Yeah, but at least I'm almost 17 now. I fought him the first time, uh, the second time when I was 11."

"11?"

"Uh-huh. He's tried a lot of times since then. I'm always sure that this time I . . . won't make it. But somehow - I think mainly through luck, I guess, but somehow - I've always managed to survive but then he's always gotten away, too, madder than ever, and more determined to kill me the next time." She made no comment but Harry was sure that she understood everything he was not telling her. "Now, the wizarding world is trying to get rid of him and we've been having this . . . war for the last year or so."

"Mm."

"Dumbledore, the main opposition guy I guess you could call him, hoped that if everyone thought I was dead that Voldemort would initiate another battle and then he could suddenly bring me out and I could kill him in a big surprise attack." That was a pretty clinical



explanation of what was bound to be several hours of pure hell. He had seen enough wizarding battles in this war to convince him that they fit basically anyone's perception of the fiery pits of Hades. The curses flashing around, the screams of the curse casting as well as the screams of those on the receiving end of Crucio, the wands flashing, the heat from fires that started from deflected spells, the presence of the devil himself . . . . It was all pretty horrific. And that was even disregarding the fact that Harry himself would undoubtedly be in head-splitting agony from being so close to Voldemort . Oh, yeah. And the fact that he was going to be expected to kill someone. It was going to be just a whole lot of chuckles.

"And that's what is supposed to happen tomorrow at . . . the Ministry."

"Yeah. That about sums it up."

"Do you think it will work?"

That was the question, wasn't it? The plan was good, Harry was sure, but something usually went wrong even with their best plans. And he had a strange feeling about things. It didn't feel right, somehow. He was quite sure that he wasn't seeing some aspect of things and that he was in danger if he didn't figure it out. "I don't know. I hope so. I just don't think this can go on much longer."

"How are you supposed to actually . . .kill him, if he's that strong?"

"Oh, Jeesh. You certainly know how to ask the hard questions, don't you?" He lay his head back against the couch. "It is morning yet?" She laughed along with him softly. "I don't want to try to explain this. It's just too . . . ." He wanted to say 'complicated' but didn't dare. The whole thing about their wands not working against each other and the fact that he had been forced to develop an entire new way to do battle with him etc., he just didn't have the strength to go into it tonight.

"Awful." She finished his sentence, but he didn't understand her.

"What?"

"You said it's just too . . . . I thought you were going to say awful. I don't think I could kill someone."

"Oh, no, that's not it. I think I actually will . . . ." No. Oh, had he told himself that lie so often that he actually believed it? He knew he wouldn't enjoy it. He just knew he wouldn't. Everyone else assumed he would love to get rid of the terrible monster that had killed so many good wizards and his friends and his parents. But she knew, didn't she? She knew that it still meant killing someone, no matter how worthless they were, and it was still going to be him that had to do it! Him! And he was going to have to live with it afterward. But still. "He's a really bad wizard, Cassie."

"I know. But you're a really, um, good person, Harry. The one fact doesn't stop the other from being true. Good people shouldn't have to kill, Harry. Not if there was any justice in the world."

"Then there's no justice. Because it takes good people to fight against evil. Or evil always wins."

"I agree completely. Completely. History has taught us that. But that doesn't make the fighting any easier." And Harry said nothing in response, because there was nothing he could say.

## Chapter 43

### Night Before Battle

#### The Truth about Sirius and Lupin

They sat there in silence for a long time. Harry thought that he even actually slept for a few minutes. It was very late by then and he was really tired. He wouldn't have believed that he could have slept, knowing what he was facing tomorrow, but for some reason he was fairly calm. He was unsure, then, what time it was when he realized that both of them were awake again. She had shifted in his arms and had stiffened briefly, so he knew that she was awake and probably wondering where she was. "Harry?" Her question was soft, like she was unsure if he was awake or not. He thought he could have pretended to still be asleep, but truthfully he wanted to talk some more, so he answered her.

"Yeah."

"Did I offend you or anything with what I said earlier?"

"No. You're right, obviously. I really don't want to, have to, uh, kill him, but I don't think I have any choice."

"No. I don't suppose you do. Does everyone assume that you want to do this?"

Harry thought for a long time about that question. "Yes. But, truthfully, it's been so much a part of my life for so long that I probably have never told them that I don't want to. Does that make sense? And I really want him dead. You understand that, don't you? He has to be killed somehow. And I do hate him. You understand that, too, don't you?"

"Yes. I understand. I just kind of wondered if anyone was thinking about you in this whole thing."

Harry gave a short laugh. "They think about me all the time. I am the classic 'golden child.' Did you miss that somewhere in the discussion earlier? 'Cause . . ."

She interrupted him abruptly. "No. I didn't miss that. I didn't mean to ask if they thought about you as much as if they thought about what you are feeling?"

"Do you mean do they send me for grief counseling and all that sort of junk, because . . ."

"No, Harry. That's not what I mean at all."

"Then you're going to have to explain it a little better because I don't have a clue what you are on about." He felt angry for some reason which he could not identify, like she was sort of implying that he was not grown up enough to handle the job.

"I just meant . . . Do they ever let you be . . . worried and scared? Or do you just have to pretend that you aren't?"

"Oh. Well, I . . . . can't be worried and scared can I? Everyone's counting on me. I am, to put it quite bluntly, their only hope. If I'm worried and scared, well . . . You heard what Ron and Hermione said was going on back at school and just in general. People are terrified, again, like they were the first time."

"But they are still fighting!"

"What?"

"Everyone thinks you're dead, right? Everyone except Dum . . .Dumple . . .dore?"

"Yeah."

"They're still fighting. They're fighting without you, Harry. So, although I believe that you probably are their best chance to eventually win, they are able to function without you and they are still fighting. In other words, it's not all on you. It's not completely your responsibility."

Harry thought about that for a long time without saying anything. Strangely, this did make him feel a little better. He didn't know why, but it did. "You're right. But Dumbledore might be making them do it and he knows I'll be there."

"You could be right. But unless he can force them to do it against their will, they are still planning on fighting without you. I'm just trying to say that I think it's all right if you let people know you're frightened."

"I'll make sure I announce that to everyone at the battle, then. Jeesh, Cassie, you're acting like I'm a big prat."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to everyone. I just meant to the people that you're close to. Like this Lupin person. And, of course, Ron and Hermione."

"They already know. I can't keep too much from any of them."

"And your godfather, Sirius." Suddenly Harry lost all interest in the argument about whether he should tell people he was afraid.

"What?"

"Well, you haven't mentioned him. But he's going to be happy you're back and he's going to be fighting with you and everything, I guess. I mean, he is a, uh, wizard and everything, isn't he?"

"Um . . . a wizard, yeah." There must have been something in his voice even though Harry was trying to keep it smooth. He didn't want to start crying again. That would just be too embarrassing for words.

"He's, uh, dead, isn't he?" Harry could only nod now, afraid to actually speak. He had talked about Sirius' death this year, quite a few times with people who knew about it, hoping that by bringing it out into the open, it wouldn't hurt so bad. It hadn't worked very well and for the most part his friends avoided the topic completely as much as possible. "So, when you said you couldn't write to him, you didn't just mean because you were in hiding, did you?" He shook his head this time but managed to whisper out a no. She didn't say anything for a

while but Harry knew she hadn't gone back to sleep. Finally, she asked, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Not really." She didn't press him. She just nodded and was quiet again for a few minutes. "It was my fault." Harry expected a quick denial of this. Every time he said that to anyone before, they instantly jumped into rapid-fire statements that it wasn't true, even though Harry knew that it was. Cassie didn't say anything like that at all. Instead, he heard her whisper,

"Why do you think that? Did you kill him?"

It was such a ridiculous question that Harry almost choked. "Of course I didn't kill him! I . . . I loved him. And he," God, this hurt to say, "he loved me, too."

"So . . . you didn't kill him but somehow it's still your fault?"

"Well, I didn't kill him but I made it so that he . . . got killed."

"Mm. How did you do that?"

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh, yeah. Well, that's all right." Harry couldn't sit there anymore with her. She didn't understand anything. She didn't know what he . . .

"I've got to get up." She didn't try to dissuade him or anything. She just shifted so that he could maneuver off the couch. He wasn't sure why he felt disappointed at that, but he did. A moment later, he was standing next to the couch, looking down at her. She was still half sitting and looking up at him. "I . . . I" He wanted to ask for his blanket back but he couldn't for some reason. The thought of trying to get comfortable again on that dreadful chair or, even worse, the floor was just impossible, especially knowing how it felt to hold her. "I need to get a drink."

"Okay." He went into the kitchen and poured himself a drink of water. He sat down at the kitchen table and drank it slowly, thinking over the entire conversation. He wished that she would start nagging him to

tell him all the details, or make stupid assumptions, or say that he shouldn't cry, or that everything would be all right, or some other trite stupid comment so that he could be mad at her. But, no! She had to be so darn understanding and sympathetic that it just made him want to keep talking. He didn't want to talk about Sirius. She could never understand about him - never! So there was no point in talking about it, was there? No! Of course not. He stepped over to the door and looked out the window. Yeah, they were still there. He wasn't surprised. Her concerned face peeked out of the living room a minute later. "Harry? Are you all right?"

He nodded and went back into the kitchen. He heard her soft footsteps behind him. Her arms slid around his waist from behind and he felt her press her face against his back. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"You don't need to apologize. You didn't say anything wrong."

"Then why are you hiding out in the kitchen?"

"I'm not hiding. I was just thirsty." She stepped from behind him and then took a drink out of his cup and he felt a sudden thrill at the familiarity. She had done that once before and he had thought at the time that it was one of the most intimate things they had ever done. Of course, that was before the kiss on the couch. The same couch where they had been sitting a few minutes before. In the dark. Under a blanket. Completely alone. Was he insane? Why wasn't he distracting her from her questions? That would shut her up for sure. He put his thumb under her chin and tilted her face up to his. She smiled but before he could lower his head to kiss her, she stepped away from him again. She left the kitchen, and Harry thought this might be her way of inviting him back to . . . the couch with her. He followed a mere two seconds behind her. She was busy disentangling the two blankets and Harry felt such a powerful stab of disappointment that he almost stopped her.

"I don't blame you for not . . . wanting to talking about things. I'm being too pushy. It's all right if you're mad."

"I'm not mad, Cassie. And I . . . don't want to sleep on the chair, or even sit on the chair. I want to hold you again. Is that all right?" In

answer, she put his blanket back over the top of hers and Harry groaned to himself at the sight she presented in the dim light of the room. He was awfully glad the girls had decided not to wear the T-shirts. A niggling voice in the back of his brain disagreed. He shoved that voice way back into the furthest corner of his mind and smiled at her. It took a few minutes this time to get comfortable. She was tense and Harry was tense. Finally, somehow, they managed to find a reasonable position and Harry wrapped his arms around her waist.

Then he started talking. And he surprised himself in how much he told her. "I made a mistake. A really big mistake. I thought that . . . he was being hurt and I went to rescue him. Hermione tried to warn me that I was rushing into things. But I didn't want to believe her. Instead, I blamed her for not caring what happened to him, insisting that I needed to find him immediately." Harry didn't even mention Kreacher and the part that his lies had played in the whole fiasco. It didn't really matter, anyway. "It was a trap. They, . . . he wanted me to come there to rescue Sirius so that they could . . . get me to do something for Voldemort. Then they were going to kill me." She nodded. Harry was even more surprised that he could speak about this as calmly as he was. He kept going. "A whole group of, uh, . . . people on our side . . . came to get me. There was a big fight. Then, suddenly he was there and then he hugged me and then suddenly he was, uh, dead. His own cousin . . . she killed him. She killed him. He was there and then he wasn't and they wouldn't let me go get him. I wanted to die, too. I didn't care about . . . Lupin held me back. He wouldn't let me go and get him. He was right there, just beyond the curtain. Maybe I could have reached him. Maybe he was still alive. Maybe if I'd have been faster I could have brought him back. Maybe. Maybe he saw me and wanted me to get him and I . . . I didn't and maybe he still is blaming me, and maybe. . . . It was all my fault. All. My. Stupid. Fault."

Harry was very sure that she hadn't understood the whole last part of his narrative but he was grateful that she didn't ask any more questions. He steeled himself for the usual rush of comforting words that followed him anytime the story was discussed. People tended to say stupid things like 'He died trying to protect you, Harry' ( like that was supposed to make him feel better), or 'He knew the risks when he came to the Ministry' (that didn't mean he wanted to die), 'At least



he didn't suffer' (that was comforting), 'You were doing what you thought was right, after all' (Ditto, ditto, ditto).

"That must have been terrible. It must still be terrible. I can tell you miss him a lot. What was he like?"

"He loved me."

"I'm glad."

Harry relaxed, then. Telling the whole stupid story and not being condemned for it somehow made the pain a little easier to bear. She just sat quietly in front of him, her head leaning against his chest. Harry closed his eyes and felt her breathing deepen and slow as she went to sleep. It was quite a while later that he opened his eyes again. She was still asleep and he tried hard not to move so that she wouldn't wake up. He just stared out into the darkness. He had no idea what time it was. She still had her watch on and he tried to look at it, but it was too dark in the room and the dial didn't light up or anything. He guessed it was about 2 or so, but he didn't really know for sure. Despite his best efforts at sitting very still, it wasn't too long before she moved again and woke up.

"Did you sleep?" Her voice was heavy, soft, and sleepy.

"Yeah. I just woke up a few minutes ago."

"Um, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You've told me about Sirius and you mentioned someone named Lupin in that story and then you asked about him earlier. Who is he?"

"He was a friend of my dad's, just like Sirius was. I met him in third year when he came to teach at Hogwarts. We've gotten to be friends since then."

"What does he teach?"

"Well, he doesn't teach there anymore. But he taught us Defense for one year."

"You mentioned your defense classes before. Is that like Karate and stuff?"

"Um, no. The name of the class is Defense against the Dark Arts."

"The Dark Arts? Oh, you mean like Voldemort's magic, dark magic?"

"Yeah. The class teaches us to recognize and fight dark magic. He was a really good teacher. I learned a lot that year."

"Then why isn't he still teaching?"

"I told you . . . His health isn't good."

"Oh, yeah."

"Well, okay, that's not really true. You have to understand that I usually don't tell people this because then they hate him. This one fact led to . . . Well, I guess you'll never meet him so it doesn't really matter. And to understand this one thing lets you understand all the other things that came after it and so it's important but it's also terrible and yet it's-"

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to tell me whatever it is you're trying to tell me or not tell me, but I don't understand what you are talking about."

"Sorry. He's a werewolf."

She laughed then, obviously thinking he was joking. "I'm serious, Cassie. He's a werewolf. A real one. He turns into a big gray wolf when the moon is full and then he's really dangerous and stuff. And so parents didn't want him around their kids, once the news got out."

"Werewolves don't exist, Harry."

"Yes. They do. You just don't know about them. But I've seen him transform and I've . . . It's incredible. It really is. But beautiful, somehow. And scary. He takes a potion now that . . ."

"Stops it?"

"No. There's no cure for it. It just . . . Well, it makes him stay conscious of himself when he changes, so he's not dangerous, well, not as dangerous. But wizards hate werewolves and so he is pretty much shunned by people when they know. And it makes him horribly thin and sick looking."

"Are you being serious?"

"Completely. Like I said, I wouldn't tell you because now you'll be frightened of him and hate him, too. But you'll never meet him, so I guess it doesn't matter."

"I thought you liked him?"

"I do. I really do. He's kind of, um, taken over for Sirius now that he's . . . gone."

"Then I'd like him, too."

"You'd be scared." He tried to put a teasing note in his voice, wanting to stop talking about this with her. He needed to stop telling her all these secrets about himself. But, somehow, holding her tonight, he felt very comfortable and wanted her to understand him, really understand him. And that meant she had to understand all the things about himself that he usually never told anybody.

"Maybe a little. But then I'd like him. Is he nice to you?"

"Nice? Yeah. He's nice. He likes me a lot. But then, he was a really good friend of my dad's. I'm a lot like my dad. So I guess it's not hard for him to like me."

"So he likes you only because you remind him of your dad?" Harry thought about that. He had never had the same sort of relationship with Lupin as he had had with Sirius. But he supposed that was because Lupin was just naturally more reserved. Sirius tended to be very emotional - he laughed, lived, loved, and hated very strongly. And he didn't care who knew it. Lupin, no, Remus, was more subtle about expressing his emotions. But that didn't mean he didn't feel things just as much. He knew that Lupin liked him. And he was the one who had always told Sirius that Harry was not identical to James, even if they did look alike.

"No. I think he just likes me because I'm . . . me, I guess. Boy, that sounds really stupid."

"I don't think so."

Harry sat quietly for a few minutes. He was dreadfully homesick at that moment, talking about Sirius and Remus and thinking about his dad. He felt so lonely which was probably ridiculous since his two best friends were right in the next room and he was holding Cassie. That thought reminded him of his line of thought earlier while the two of them had been in the kitchen. He suddenly wanted to kiss her again, really kiss her. Maybe then he would feel a little less alone. He bent forward until his face was level with hers. "Cassie?" She turned in mild surprise at his voice in her ear and he kissed her. Her lips softened a little and then she turned in his arms. Harry put both his hands on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him, then tilted his head a little so that he could deepen the kiss, but she pulled away. Harry was surprised. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, it's just that . . . this is not the right time or place. We're lying on a couch together in the dark. I think we need to be really careful."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm not mad. I just . . . I'm tired. I'm going to try to sleep some more."

"Okay." He was tired, too. He should probably sleep while she did. It would probably be light fairly soon and who knew what the morning would bring.

When he woke the next time, she was already awake. "Hi."

"Hi." He couldn't see her very well in the darkness, but he could tell from her voice that she was smiling.

"Can I ask you a stupid question, Harry?"

"Sure."

"What's a portkey?" That was so unexpected that Harry almost laughed, but he caught it back before it escaped.

"That's not a stupid question at all. I should have explained it a long time ago - well, earlier in the evening. It's a, uh, thing, that . . ."

"What does it look like?"

"Well, it can look like anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it can be anything. You just pick an object, any object. An old shoe, a piece of paper, an old soda can, a statue, a paperweight, you know, anything." Or a trophy, he thought, but he didn't say that. "You put a spell on it and then when you touch it, it takes you to a pre-set location."

"Takes you? What does that mean?"

"It takes you. You leave one place and wind up in the other place."

"Instantly?"

"Yeah, pretty much. There may be a little lapse for a long distance. I'm not really sure about that. It seems instant. It's not my favorite way

to travel, though. You kind of have a hard landing, usually. I usually wind up on my butt."

"That's impossible."

"It's magic."

"I still don't know that I believe in this, um, magic that you do."

"That's all right. You don't need to. You'll be going home in the morning and it's probably best if you can just forget everything you heard here tonight."

"Do you really think you can take me home in the morning?"

"Yeah." He tried to inject that one word with as much confidence as he could. He really thought that the Death Eaters would have something better to do come the day of the actual battle than sit outside on a Muggle street hoping that an unknown wizard would suddenly turn up. He did avoid telling Cassie one thing, though. It wouldn't be him taking her home. Too risky. It would be Ron. They hadn't talked about it. But he knew. And Ron knew, too.

"So . . . if you don't like to travel by, uh, portkey, what do you like? Are there other options?"

"Oh, yeah. There are lots of different ways to get from place to place. The best one and easiest one is apparating. That is just like it sounds. You pop out of one place and end up in the other place. Kind of like on the old Bewitched reruns. But I'm not old enough to do that yet. You have to learn how and then you have to take a test. If I'm still, um, around next month, I can go take my test. I've practiced a little and it's great. But I'd need to work at it before I would dare try to go get my, uh, license." It took Harry a minute to realize that Cassie was laughing. Not soft gentle chuckles or wondering amazed giggles, but actual belly laughs. She was smothering her face in the back of the couch so that she wouldn't wake up Ron and Hermione but he could feel the way her shoulders were shaking that she was howling with laughter. He just pursed his lips and folded his arms and waited for her to stop. It took a very long time. Just when he thought she had

calmed down she would start up again. Finally she sat up, wiping her face on the back of her hands.

"Test . . . license . . . Bewitched reruns! Oh, Harry! That is the funniest thing I've heard in a long time! How do you make this stuff up?"

"I'm not making it up! I'm serious. You just, uh, pop out of . . ." She started giggling again and Harry stopped talking. "It's fine. Don't believe me. I think I laughed, too. When they told me."

"But I mean, it's just so silly. You either do magic or you don't right? It's ridiculous that you have to learn to do this stuff."

"Well, uh, no. Why do you think we go to school?"

What?" She was genuinely confused by that statement and Harry was confused at her confusion. What didn't she understand?

"I'm sorry. I asked why you think we go to school if it's not to practice."

"Well, to learn things, of course. Why does anyone go to school?"

"That's right. To learn magic."

"You go to a, uh, magic school?"

"Yeah. What did you think we were talking about?"

"I thought that maybe some, well, um, witches and wizards happened to go to your school but that you just learned regular stuff."

"Oh, you mean like, um, French and geometry and chemistry and stuff?"

"Basically, yeah, I guess." Harry thought for a minute before he answered her. He guessed that he could understand her confusion, especially if she still refused to believe that they were actually magic.

"Well, that's not how it is. We just have classes on learning how to do magic. It's fun, although of course I have some subjects I like better than others." Cassie nodded. "And we have to take tests and things to make sure we learned it all."

"So it's not just natural?"

"Not really. Some people make it look really easy - like Hermione. Even though she's Muggle-born she's the top in most of her classes." Harry chuckled, remembering how obsessed Hermione had been with her grades through the years. "Others, unfortunately, just can't do very much right at all, even pure blood wizards have to learn how to do it. Like Ron, for example. His family is pure wizard for as far back as they can even remember but he and his brothers and sister still had to go to school and some have done really well and others, like Ron, have to really work at it. His grades aren't that fantastic although he is good at some things."

"How many brothers and sisters does he have? Obviously there are more than just Ron and Ginny."

"Yeah. Would you believe me if I told you there are seven kids in that family? Ron and Ginny are the youngest. Ginny is the only girl."

"And she's a year younger than Ron?"

"Yeah."

There was a long pause then and Harry thought that she may have fallen asleep again. He was just about to drift off himself, warm and relaxed despite the circumstances. But she wasn't asleep because she suddenly said, "Tell me about her."



## Chapter 44

### Night before Battle

#### Dawn

Harry didn't need to ask who she meant. He had actually been surprised she hadn't asked this question earlier when Hermione and Ron had mentioned Ginny and her "breakdown." The conversation had been detailed enough that Cassie would have been stupid not to have figured out that he and Ginny had some sort of relationship. Cassie was definitely not stupid, so Harry was positive that she was curious to know exactly what sort of relationship the two of them had. Harry wished he had an easy answer for her but like all of the things they had talked about tonight, it was a more complicated situation than she might expect. He tried to think of the best way to start talking about it but nothing sprang to mind. After a few minutes, he heard a tentative, "Harry?"

"She's . . . a powerful witch. She's a really good Quidditch player." He would have continued on in the same vein, but Cassie interrupted.

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Tell me about her - as a person."

"She's got red hair and she's a little shorter than you are . . ."

"Harry Ev-, uh, Potter. You know that is not what I mean!" Cassie was laughing, but Harry knew her well enough to know that her patience would not last for much longer.

"Oh, all right. I'll try. But I may not do the greatest job of this." She nodded and Harry decided to just start at the beginning. "Well, she saw me the first time on my very first day of school - when Ron and I were getting on the train."

"Wait, wait! You take a train to a magic school?"

"Well, yeah. But we kind of have to because the kids can't apparate yet and having everyone floo over or use a portkey isn't really

practical for all of those students. Especially since a lot of them don't know any magic at all at that point." Harry didn't mention that you couldn't apparate inside of Hogwarts. That just would make the entire story even more complicated.

"So this train . . ."

"The Hogwarts Express. Leaves from King's Cross Station."

"Oh, you must be kidding now!"

"Nope."

"But that's just - Hey! Are you trying to distract me?"

"Um, well . . . Is it working?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I want to hear about Ginny."

"The train is pretty interesting. It's a bright red train with no one really . . ."

"No, Harry. Ginny."

"Well, you are the one that interrupted me the first time."

"That's true. I won't interrupt again unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Did I mention that it's a magical platform? Muggles can't pass through . . ."

"Harry!"

"As I was saying . . . She saw me the first time the first time I was heading to school. Of course, she didn't go to Hogwarts that year. She was too young. But she . . . Well, she got a bit of a crush on me."

She knew my name, of course, everyone knew who I was, plus I guess she thought I was cute."

"I bet you were, too."

"I bet I wasn't. I was . . . awkward and out of place and my clothes were just, uh, horrendous. Plus my glasses were broken and had tape around them -- you know, like I was the biggest geek in the entire world."

"Why were your clothes horrendous? And why were your glasses broken?"

"Oh, I don't know if I want to get into that whole story."

"Tell me fast, then."

"Okay. My aunt used to force me to wear clothes that were way too big for me. I think she did it to humiliate me. And someone had punched me in the face and broken my glasses. And she avoided spending money on me whenever possible."

"That's horrible, but I already knew she was mean to you. I'm sure there's more to that story but I'll ask another time. I want to hear more about Ginny."

"Anyway, I saw her that next summer at Ron's house and she wouldn't speak to me at all, just turned beet red and squeaked whenever she saw me. Everyone kept telling me she had talked about me the whole summer but I saw no evidence that she could even string two words together."

"And you couldn't tell that she had a crush on you?"

"Well, I was a socially retarded 12-year-old boy. I had no idea how girls acted when they liked you! I hardly even knew her name. But that year, of course, she started school with us and she was in Gryffindor, also, along with the three of us and her other brothers who were already at the school." Harry had missed the sorting that year, of course, but figured that Ginny was probably just as relieved to get

into Gryffindor as Ron had been. Everyone in their family had been in Gryffindor and for Ron the year before it had been his greatest fear that he would let the family down and be sorted into one of the other houses.

"I'm sure that she wanted to impress me that year, convince me to like her. I didn't pay that much attention to her. But I wish I had. She got into -" Just how did Harry start to explain to Cassie about the whole Chamber of Secrets fiasco. Would she even believe the story about a memory taking over a live human body and forcing her to do things? What about the whole basilisk? The Phoenix, Gilderoy 'I'm an idiot' Lockhart, Tom Riddle, the giant spiders out in the Forbidden Forest, Hagrid . . . It was all just too much to -

"Harry? Are you still there?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Like I was saying. She got into trouble that year. Big trouble. Maybe if I'd been paying more attention to her. . . Maybe if any of us had paid more attention to her . . . Anyway. She almost died."

"What!"

"I thought you weren't going to interrupt me."

"I said I'd only interrupt if it was necessary!" Harry just smiled.

"She almost died and I had to . . . Well, this is hard to explain. Voldemort almost killed her and I had to . . . I sort of . . . I rescued her. I saved her life. . . . I almost died, too." Harry was silent again. He had been 12 then and had not thought that much at the time about how close he had come to dying down there in the Chamber with her. Since then, though, he had often thought of that long fight down in the Chamber and been afraid for himself. And he knew how it ended. This time, Cassie didn't interrupt his long silence.

"I think after that, her crush was a serious case of hero worship. I was even more embarrassed to see her. I didn't like the thought that she felt somehow . . . obligated to me. So I basically avoided her as much as I could. I mean, a lot of times I saw her because she was still

Ron's little sister and she was in my house and everything. But, I tried never to be alone with her or anything, or find any reason to really speak to her. I had a lot of things going on in my own life over the next couple years anyway. As usual."

"Voldemort was still chasing you, of course." This wasn't a question. Just a statement.

"Yeah. That was a big part of it. But then in my fifth year, her fourth, things changed between us. She started talking to me more, normally. No more squeaking or blushing bright red every time she saw me. She, um, started dating other boys and she told Hermione that she didn't like me that way anymore. That she just wanted to be friends. And that was a really interesting year." His tone was injected with sarcasm. "We wound up forming this group, kind of a club, where we practiced defensive stuff. I taught it and there were lots of people in it. Ginny was one of them and she was really good. It was the first time that I really saw how powerful she was. By the end of the year, I had come to look at her in a completely different way. In the fight at the ministry at the end of the year, where Sirius was . . . killed, she was unbelievable. She had a broken ankle and was really beaten up. But it didn't matter. She kept fighting. She was so tough." Harry sat there for a minute or so remembering the fight, the pain, the terror and Ginny, hurt but still hanging in there, beat up but not beaten. It was then things changed. It was then, even though he did not realize it at the time. Harry expected Cassie to interrupt and ask about the club and about the fight, but she didn't. He continued. "I couldn't play Quidditch that year. And Ginny took my place. She was good as a Seeker. Really good. I was pretty impressed with her there, too. But she kept dating these other people so I decided that she and I were not meant to be together, or if we were, I had blown it. And I could live with that." Harry stopped talking and took a deep breath. Cassie still didn't say anything and Harry wondered if she had fallen asleep. He shifted slightly and she turned her face to meet him and he could tell that her eyes were wide open. "Do you want me to keep going?"

"Yes, of course." Harry felt really uncomfortable talking about this with her. And the more he talked, the more uncomfortable he became. He liked Cassie - a lot. Things were still unsettled with Ginny but talking

to one girl he liked about another girl he liked was very strange. But, all right.

"Anyway, that summer, I was home and didn't see her until it was almost time to go back to school. When I saw her and she looked at me without that, I don't know, blushing shyness, I suddenly missed it. I missed it terribly. I suddenly realized that I didn't have anyone anymore. Anyone who really . . . loved me. Sirius was gone . . . and there was no one else. No one." Harry gasped, remembering the raw pain of that moment all over again. He had felt so suddenly abandoned. He had run out of the Burrow and walked for hours, trying to come to terms with things before returning to the Weasleys who all offered various comforting homilies. They all assumed he had been upset over Sirius and he hadn't corrected their assumptions. His heart had ached the whole time he had been at the Burrow and he had been so glad when it was time to go back to school. The crazy schedule of Quidditch practice, classes, homework, and the war had kept him busy. But he had tried often to seek Ginny out and speak to her and when he did, she was always friendly but she was usually holding hands with someone else.

He continued with his story. "I guess I didn't realize how much I counted on her loving me until she didn't anymore. But, I thought as the school year went on that maybe she really did still like me, at least a little."

"Why?"

"Well, even though she was supposedly dating all these boys, I never saw her getting really, intimate with them. I mean, you know, kissing and hugging and stuff."

"Would you have normally seen that? I mean, that's kind of private."

"Yeah. I would have. Going to a school like that, there aren't a lot of secrets. You wind up doing things a lot more openly than maybe you'd imagine - things like kissing. Besides, even if I didn't personally see it, I would have heard about it. You just get used to having very little privacy at boarding school."

Cassie seemed taken aback at the notion of everyone knowing just about everything about everyone else. "I don't know if I'd like that much."

Harry chuckled. But it was true. Everyone always knew what everyone else was doing and with whom they were doing it. And with Ginny, he knew her dating was pretty platonic - even considering that she was only 15. He had even heard one of her dates complaining that she wouldn't do more than hold hands and had felt a thrill of possessiveness at that. "Anyway, I became convinced, rightly or wrongly, that she still really loved me but was just trying to move beyond it or maybe just trying to make me jealous or something. I guess that's pretty egocentric of me, but that's what I thought. Maybe I needed to believe it . . ." To keep his sanity, Harry thought. He had needed to think that. It filled some of the emptiness.

"Well, it sounds like there may have been something there. Did you try to find out? Did you talk to her?"

"Yes, I did." Harry frowned at the memory of the fight he and Ginny had. He had asked her to go to Hogsmeade with him. What had frustrated him the most was how her eyes seemed to say yes and her mouth said no. "I had asked her out a couple of times but she always refused. She always had prior commitments or something like that. Finally, I took her aside and told her exactly how I felt about her. I couldn't believe it; she actually laughed at me. She told me I had been blind for almost five years and asked why should she come running to me when I finally had woken up." Harry closed his eyes at the pain her comments had caused him. He remembered the anger he had felt and how he had reacted. "So, I lashed out at her. I made her cry." Harry felt horrible about the entire incident. He didn't want to remember it now, either. It had just been a disaster. "Then I did something really stupid. I told her she ought to be happy I was asking her out because she could stop pretending to like all the other guys she had been going out with. She told me I was arrogant and well, she inferred that my parents weren't married when I was born. Then she told me I could go get stuffed."

Cassie laughed quietly. "She actually called you a . . . ?"

"Yeah, but I deserved it. Of course, I didn't admit that at the time. Instead I had to act . . . well, like an idiot. I told her where she could go and what she could do when she got there. Then I stormed away and . . . we didn't really see each other again after that. It was a terrible time in school for her and she just kept studying and managed to ignore me pretty thoroughly. We would see each other in the hall or at meals and would stare right past each other like the other wasn't even there. Then, of course, there was the battle and then . . . well, then I've been here."

"So, if I understood what Hermione said earlier, she really did still like you, she just didn't want to admit it to you, or herself."

"I guess."

"So when you go back to school . . . what do you think is going to happen, between the two of you, I mean?"

"I don't know. I . . . Maybe by now she's forgotten about me."

Cassie laughed. "I doubt that. I mean if she's liked you for six years I doubt that one fight and three weeks is going to change anything."

"Three weeks when she thinks I'm dead!" Harry felt very strange about having this conversation with Cassie. He really liked her, in a romantic way. He thought the couch incident from earlier proved that, pretty thoroughly. And that entire time, he hadn't thought about Ginny - not even once. He decided maybe it was time to make it clear to Cassie how he felt about her. "But, then, I came here and then I met you and now . . . I don't know what I want." Well, so much for clarity.

"Yeah." They both sat quietly for a few minutes. Harry had hoped that Cassie would say something a little more forceful, something about how much she liked him or that she didn't want him to see Ginny at all ever again, that way he could admit how much he really liked her. Maybe she had some idea, though. Or maybe he could show her, if he couldn't find the right words. He shifted her again in his arms so that it was easier to kiss her and bent his head to find her mouth again like he had a while ago. She kissed him gently and then turned her head away. "I told you, Harry. This isn't . . . right."



"What do you mean? Why don't you want to kiss me, now? You didn't complain earlier." Okay, he could admit it. He sounded like he was pouting and he didn't want to, but he couldn't help it.

"It's just too . . . much. I'm afraid we may do something that we don't want to because . . . it's dark and you're scared and I'm scared and . . ."

"I'm not scared and I want to kiss you."

But Cassie just shook her head. "No. Not right now." She was quite adamant. "You said you were scared earlier." She sounded slightly affronted, like somehow her admitting she was scared when he wasn't was just not tolerable.

"No. I said I was scared for you. I want you to get home safely. You're not used to this whole situation."

"And you are?"

"Pretty much." He really hated the sulky way he sounded. He needed to get a grip. If she didn't want to kiss him, she didn't want to kiss him. He'd survive.

"That's a stupid thing to say. All of you were acting pretty nervous and distressed earlier." She was right, of course. But now Harry didn't want to admit it, not if she was going to say he was being stupid.

"He's been chasing me my whole life. He doesn't scare me!" That second sentence was an outright lie but Cassie latched onto the first part of his statement.

"That's true. Why has he been chasing you your whole life?"

"I already told you why."

"No, you didn't. You said that he came to your house when you were one year old to kill you. Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, Cassie. No one knows." There. Now his voice sounded more normal. "Try to go back to sleep. I don't think it's too much longer before morning."

"You really don't know?"

He didn't answer her. He had been completely honest with her tonight - up until a few seconds before. He didn't want to up the lying. Maybe she would just forget it, especially if he pretended to go back to sleep himself. But he was too upset to even pretend to relax and take the deep even breaths of unconsciousness. And after a few minutes, he gave up the effort. He knew she wasn't asleep either and after a minute he said, "That's not true, Cassie. I know why and Dumbledore knows why and I suppose Voldemort knows why, although he's never said as much."

"Oh."

"I just, um, don't like to bring it up. . . I mean . . . I just found out myself last year and I . . . It's still kind of hard to talk about."

"Oh."

"You're going to think I'm mental, but then I guess you already do, don't you?"

"I don't think you're crazy, Harry." She said this quite forcefully. Somehow it made him feel a little better.

"Do you believe in prophecies?"

"Yes, I guess so. I'd never thought about it too much before."

"I never did before I was 13. Then I heard one and it came true."

"Uh, huh."

"Then last year I heard that one was made about me, before I was even born. And Voldemort heard about it. And that's why he wanted to kill me when I was little and why he still wants to kill me."

"Okay. So this prophecy . . ."

"It basically says that a boy would be born at the end of July who would be able to defeat the Dark Lord. That the Dark Lord would mark him as his equal. And that he would have power that the Dark Lord didn't have." She didn't say anything. Harry swallowed hard. This next part was what always gave him chills. Not like the rest wasn't bad enough. His voice was quiet. "And then it says that one of us has to kill the other one. That . . . neither of us can live while the other one survives." She took a deep breath after that statement. "Anyway. He figured that it was me and wanted to kill me before I had a chance to grow up and kill him. But it didn't work, obviously. And now . . . well. You understand why I'm always the one that has to go fight him. I'm the only one that can . . . kill him."

"Oh. I see." Her voice was soft.

They were quiet for a few minutes again, both of them thinking their own thoughts about things. Harry wished he knew what time it was. He wasn't too comfortable anymore discussing this with her. She had been nothing but empathetic and understanding, but he wasn't used to baring his soul to other people. He was tempted to get up again, claiming to be thirsty or that his leg was asleep or something but she leaned her head back against him and he thought she had gone to sleep again so he didn't want to wake her.

"Can I ask you one more question?" So she wasn't asleep. Maybe after he answered this, he would get up and spend the rest of the night in the chair.

"I guess so." He really hoped it wasn't about the prophecy. He would prefer not to say anything more about it.

"You said earlier that this last three weeks has been, uh, hell. Has it really been that bad? I mean, it doesn't sound too much fun back where you come from, either." Her question was quiet. He could tell that he had hurt her feelings when he said that, although it had been true to a great degree.

"Well, there have been some good parts." He hugged her briefly. She really had made it tolerable. In fact, better than tolerable. "If I could use magic, I might be tempted to stay here. I like . . . your family and I like . . . you. I do like you, Cassie. You know that, right?"

"Yes." She spoke slowly, like she was waiting for the other part of the statement.

"And we've had some really great times together. I loved teaching you chess, and making cookies, and you're really easy to talk to. And I have to admit kissing you is fantastic, also."

"Yes. That's true. I like kissing you, too." She laughed softly. "Plus, you liked the movies."

"Oh, yeah! That was terrific. I loved the James Bond, especially. In fact, after . . . later, I'm going to try to talk Ron into going to a Muggle movie theater with me and seeing that . . . ." Harry's mind suddenly caught onto an idea. He turned it over in his thoughts. Was it possible? "I've got to get up, Cassie." This time, he wasn't trying to avoid talking to her, he just needed to . . . He walked over to the desk and rifled through the papers on top. The cold light of morning was allowing him to see well enough to find what he needed. He glanced at the chess set, ready to move it to look underneath it when another thought occurred to him. Things seemed to be so obvious, now.

There it was. He grabbed the piece of parchment he was looking for and walked over to the dim lamp by the chair, flipping it on suddenly. Cassie groaned and covered her head with a blanket. Harry waited for his eyes to adjust and grabbed his glasses before reading his own scrawling handwriting. He read the parchment over and over again, thinking carefully about what was written on it. He also thought for a long time about the last message Dumbledore had sent through Sir Lionel. He glanced up at the clock. It was almost 5. It would be light soon and he had a lot to talk to Ron and Hermione about. They had 12 hours before they took the portkey. And he suddenly knew exactly what Voldemort was going to do.

## Chapter 45

### Departure

#### Morning

Harry sat in the chair for a little more than an hour after he had settled on a course of action. The sun had risen by then and the sunlight was reaching every corner of the room. Cassie had gone to sleep with the blanket over her head and Harry didn't want to wake her up. She had to be exhausted. He was tired, also, but the adrenaline that was coursing through his body was preventing him from relaxing enough to go back to sleep. That was not even considering the fact that he was back in the uncomfortable chair with no blanket. Finally, he decided he had better get moving. The day had arrived.

He stood and stretched, trying to work the kinks out of his back and neck. He walked to the window, his heartbeat speeding up just a little as he reached the curtain and pulled it aside. His heart sank and he swore under his breath as he saw not only the two hulking figures of Crabbe and Goyle but also Lucius Malfoy. Malfoy had returned to their little stakeout. "Go away you stupid blighters. It's the day of the battle. Shouldn't you be somewhere kissing Voldemort's . . ." Harry was interrupted by a loud snort, followed by long, continued snoring from his bedroom. He smiled to himself, wondering how Hermione could ever sleep through Ron's snoring. But then, he had done it for years. Of course, he (and all of his other roommates) had learned silencing charms almost immediately and Hermione couldn't do that here. But maybe it didn't bother her too much. She must be a sound sleeper.

Harry decided he better shower first before tackling breakfast. His neck was still sore and he thought the hot water would feel great. Plus, whenever everyone else woke up, they wouldn't have to worry about giving him a turn in the bathroom. He stood outside his room for a long minute. The door was still open, but he was afraid to look inside. Finally, he decided that if he could face Voldemort, he could certainly look at his two friends, even if they were asleep, uh, together. So he scrunched his eyes closed and turned the corner. He opened one eye as little as possible and looked at his bed. He smiled and

relaxed. Ron and Hermione were still on top of the covers laying on their backs, with their fingers interlaced together. A blanket was spread partly over them. He felt a brief pang of emotion at the scene. He wasn't sure what emotion it was, exactly, and he didn't want to take time to analyze it. Harry moved to his dresser quietly as he could so he wouldn't wake them up. He gathered a change of clothes and made his way to the bathroom.

After showering and dressing, Harry took out his remaining towels and laid them out for the others. He had five towels and was glad that he had splurged and gotten several when he had arrived. He was also happy they were clean. It would have proven a bit difficult and awkward if people had to share. He made his way to the kitchen and opened the fridge. He considered his options for breakfast. He actually had plenty of breakfast food as he ate that meal every day at home, unlike the other meals where he was usually at Cassie's or eating out. He decided that there was no use keeping anything back - they would all be gone by tonight anyway. So he began frying bacon and cracking eggs. While they cooked he pulled his final loaf of bread out of the cupboard and began making toast. He was happy to discover one more can of frozen orange juice and set that out to thaw. The combination of the aroma of cooking food and clatter of pans brought Ron out of his sleep. He stumbled into the kitchen rubbing his eyes and looking a little worse for wear. Harry turned and looked him over. "Good morning."

Ron grunted hello and then asked, "Did you notice that the stupid git Malfoy is back?"

"Yes. Unfortunately. How did you sleep?"

"About as well as you and Cassie."

"Oh, could you hear us? Did we keep you awake?"

"It's okay, mate. Hermione and I weren't too sleepy. We, uh, did a lot of talking."

"Yeah, I understand that. Do you think you could set the table?" Ron had just started to lay out the paper plates when someone else

stumbled through the kitchen doorway. Hermione squinted against the bright sunshine. Her hair looked more bushy than usual and she was still trying to rub the sleep from her eyes. "Good morning, Harry. I just looked out the window and Malfoy's back."

Both Harry and Ron answered, "Yeah, we know." They looked at each other and grinned.

Hermione shrugged, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You'd think they'd have given it up by now, though." She looked around at the food Harry was cooking. "Do you have any hot chocolate? I really need some."

"No, Hermione. Don't you remember, I didn't have any last night." Harry smiled to himself as the mental image of Hermione begging for some hard hot chocolate on street corners crossed his mind. He forced a more serious look on his face before he turned to her again.

Hermione looked quite disappointed but nodded. "Oh, yeah, that's right. But I always have hot chocolate for breakfast. I'm used to it. Oh, well. I'm not much for coffee, but do you have that?"

Harry felt miserable. "Uh, no, Hermione. I don't have coffee either."

Hermione sat down in one of the chairs in a huff. "So what exactly do you drink in the morning to get going?"

"If it's caffeine you need, I have a can or two of Coke in the fridge."

"In the morning? Yuck."

"Oh sure, you have Coca-Cola, but you don't have any pumpkin juice," mumbled Ron.

There was again a noise from the kitchen doorway. Cassie was standing there looking a little pale and washed-out, but alert. Harry thought she looked beautiful. "Ron, Hermione, I think you should stop griping. Harry's doing the best he can. I'm glad he has any decent breakfast food at all after the stuff we had to eat yesterday." She grimaced at the thought of the frozen pizza again. "I'm sure he'd love

it if we could all go out shopping. He got pretty proficient at it while he was here." She crossed the floor on her stocking feet and Harry was hoping she was going to hug and kiss him good morning. But instead, she sat down at the table, pushing her curls out of her face. "But, of course, he can't and we can't and I think we should just be grateful for what we do have instead of focusing on all the stuff we miss. It's only for a day, after all."

Ron tried to joke, "Fine, but if this turns out to be my last meal, Harry, I'm going to stay a ghost and haunt you forever, constantly begging you for pumpkin juice." Nobody laughed and Ron hurriedly sat down next to Cassie. Hermione joined them a second later.

She tried to relieve the tension that was suddenly present by saying, "It wouldn't be your last meal. I think we'll have to eat lunch here, too." Harry rolled his eyes and Cassie looked scared. Ron just scowled.

Harry was glad he had something to distract them before the conversation got too morbid. "Well, here's breakfast - bacon, eggs, toast, and juice." Everyone looked more cheerful as Harry laid the dishes on the table between them. Cassie stared at the toast, got a very unhappy look on her face and practically yelled at Harry.

"The toast is white bread! White bread! Where's the wheat bread? Who would want to eat white bread? You know I'll only eat wheat!"

The other three teenagers stared in shock at Cassie and then Ron and Hermione broke out laughing. Harry was trying desperately to keep his laugh in, but failed a moment later and joined them. Cassie blushed after a minute and then also started to laugh. "Sorry, Harry. I guess I should practice what I preach, huh? Everything else looks good." The four of them dug into the food and Harry thought that everything tasted good. He really knew how to cook bacon, if he did say so himself.

After a minute of eating, Cassie looked at the other three. "By the way, did you notice that guy, uh, Malfoy, is back with the other two?"

All three answered in unison, "Yeah, we noticed."



Harry looked at Cassie. He was torn between two different emotions, frustration and disappointment that he couldn't get Cassie home safe before they left and happiness that she was going to have to remain with him longer. "Cassie, I'm really sorry. I don't think we're going to be able to get you home before we leave. If something changes, then we might be able to try, but I think right now you better plan on just coming with us."

Cassie, drew in her breath, held it a moment and slowly released it. "I figured that already after I saw the three of them out there this morning. But do I really have to go with you? Can't I just wait here until you leave and then walk home? You could show me the way to get out of the house and everything."

Harry leaned forward on the table and took Cassie's hand. "We can't leave you here. We have to get my invisibility cloak back, and to do that, we have to open the door. We'll do that right before we leave because it will make the house visible. They'll rush the house as soon as they see it. If you stayed behind, they would kill you."

Cassie's face went pale. "You said that before. I was hoping maybe you were exaggerating, but I don't think you are."

"No, I'm not." Harry actually thought that their killing her would be the kindest thing they would do. They may try to get information from her first, and the thought of what they would do to her made him ill. She was definitely not staying here without him.

Ron jumped into the conversation. "We'll only be at the Ministry of Magic. When the battle's over, we can take her home. During the battle we'll hide her in my dad's office. She'll be okay there. We can put a locking charm on the door and everything will be all right. We can be sure and tell someone, a member of the Order or something, that she's there in case . . . well, just to be sure someone lets her out if . . . ." He didn't want to finish the sentence and his voice trailed off instead. No one said anything for a long time. They all just kind of played with the food still on their plates.

Finally, Harry cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, we actually need to talk about that later, but she'll definitely need to portkey with us." He looked again at Cassie. "Are you frightened?" He determinedly started eating his eggs again. He wasn't going to get put off eating. He would need the strength later.

"I probably should be since I have no idea how you do this portkey thing or where you think we'll go or what I'm supposed to do if it actually works. But, I'm not. I trust you, Harry." Harry felt the same overwhelming sense of warmth that he always did when she said that. He reached for her hand, but she had already stood and stepped toward the sink with her empty plate.

"Thanks." He then decided to move the discussion to a more immediate need. "Did the three of you notice the towels I laid out in the bathroom?"

All three nodded.

"Uh, you can also use my deodorant if you don't feel weird using someone else's."

Again, all three nodded.

"Cassie, Hermione, would you like to borrow clean T-shirts to wear today?"

The girls both nodded.

Harry grinned at the three bobbing heads. "Uh, can anyone actually say anything?"

Cassie laughed. "Well, if your British Museum T-shirt is clean, I'd like to wear that. It'll bring back some nice memories. I think I'm going to need that for a day like this." Harry half expected a comment from his friends at this, but Ron had tugged Hermione over to him and was whispering something in her ear which was distracting both of them. Hermione had turned a light pink and Harry swallowed. He turned his attention back to Cassie.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, it's one of the clean ones. I'll set the T-shirts out on the bed and you girls can change in there if you want. And," Harry paused for a moment and looked at the three, "after everyone has showered, we need to talk about, well . . . what's going to happen tonight."

"You mean about me?" Cassie frowned.

"No, I mean about all four of us. We need to decide some things." Ron and Hermione looked worried at his tone of voice. Harry tried to relax and smile but he didn't feel like he did a very good job of it.

"Who wants to shower first?" Hermione asked somewhat tentatively after no one said anything for a few seconds.

"I'll go first," Ron spoke up quickly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she frowned at Ron who was doing his best to look innocent. "You want to go first so you can get out of doing the dishes."

Ron's face turned a shade pinker than usual and he grinned at Hermione. However, Harry noticed he didn't deny Hermione's accusation. Instead, he hopped up from the table, gave Hermione a peck on the cheek and said over his shoulder as he hurried out of the kitchen, "I'll make sure not to use too much hot water."

"And clean up after yourself, Cassie and I don't want to shower in a pig sty!" Hermione yelled after him. Her frown relaxed into a smile as she looked after him, and Harry noticed a twinkle in her eyes.

Cassie giggled at Hermione's show of supposed ferociousness as both girls offered to help clean up. By the time they had finished, Ron emerged from his shower looking refreshed and content even though he had to put on the same clothes again. "Nice shower, Harry. Who's next?"

Hermione and Cassie looked at each other. "Uh, you can go first," Cassie said to Hermione. "I don't mind waiting a little."

"You sure? I mean, I don't want to be a pig about things."

"It's fine, Hermione. Honestly." The brown-haired girl smiled appreciatively as she slipped into the hall. Cassie glanced around the room and Harry thought that she looked uncomfortable again as she looked at the couch. Ron had settled himself into the easy chair and put his feet up on the ottoman.

"How'd you sleep in this thing, Harry? It's really dreadful." Harry was a little surprised at that. He had assumed from the earlier conversation that Ron knew he and Cassie had both sat on the couch last night, but apparently not. Harry couldn't decide whether it was worth talking about or not, but decided against it.

"That's why I couldn't sleep well, Ron." He crossed the room and sat on the couch, smiling at Cassie. She looked hesitant but she came to sit by him. Harry tried to tug her a little closer to him. He hadn't kissed her yet this morning and she looked so adorably rumpled that he wanted to, desperately. He doubted if it would shock Ron. She wouldn't relax, though, and he soon gave up on that idea. She was really tense and upset, but Harry figured that were the circumstances, he would have done the same. Ron hopped up after a minute and turned on the television.

"Does this thing work?"

"Yeah." Harry got up and found a morning show that he had enjoyed periodically during his stay and Ron was absorbed in the inane conversation instantly, as he had only watched television a very few times in his lifetime. Harry turned back to Cassie. "Cassie, I . . ." Just then, Hermione poked her head out of the hallway door.

"Harry? Do you have a brush or something? Your comb is just not doing anything with my hair." Harry almost laughed. Her normally bushy hair was sticking up all over the place, frizzed up and kinked from the shower and her attempts at taming it with nothing but a small comb. Cassie took one look at her and reached for her purse.

"I've got a brush, Hermione, that you can use. Um, I've got a little bit of eyeshadow and mascara, too, if you want it."

"Oh, that would be fantastic. I just look so washed out if I don't do . . ." Harry didn't hear the rest of the conversation as the hallway door closed behind the two girls. He hadn't really noticed any major difference in Hermione's looks but then, he didn't know when she started wearing makeup, so maybe he was used to the unmade-up Hermione. He was going to ask Ron, but he seemed so entranced by a dancing soda can that was now on the television that Harry just decided to forget it. He stared into space for a while, listening to the soft drone of the actors on television and Ron's laughing, but mainly listening to the noise from the back hall. He could hear the two girls talking and then water started running and then it turned off and then the two girls were talking again. He couldn't hear a thing they were saying, but he could hear animated voices and occasional laughs. Great. He hoped that they weren't talking about him, but he supposed they were. He kept thinking Hermione would come out any minute but apparently she was waiting for Cassie because it seemed like at least an hour before the two girls emerged together from the hallway. Harry got a sudden jolt at seeing Cassie in his T-shirt. He had only worn it once, but he was positive that he hadn't looked that good in it. He would have to make sure she took it home with her because she filled it out in all the right places. Ron smiled at Hermione and she went over and sat on his lap, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him thoroughly. Harry was hoping that Cassie would do the same to him, but instead she sat on the opposite end of the couch and looked vaguely uncomfortable. Harry was just about to ask Cassie what was bothering her, when Hermione got up, flipped off the television, and sat back down on Ron's lap.

"So, Harry, what did you want to talk about?" Hermione asked the question, but all three of them were looking a little nervous to hear what he had to say. Truthfully, Harry was a little nervous about what he was going to say, also. He hoped that the conversation went well.

"It's about the battle tonight."

"Yeah, we gathered that much, Harry. You told us that. Just get to it, okay?" Harry excused Ron's rude tone, knowing that he was a little stressed and knowing that was how he acted when he was nervous.

"What makes you guys think the battle is going to be at the Ministry?" That was probably the last thing Ron and Hermione expected him to ask. They both looked startled. When no one said anything, Harry decided to be more specific. "Hermione, why don't you explain?" Harry looked at her expectantly.

"Well, I . . . It just is. I mean, Fudge is convinced. Not that he's the greatest authority on Voldemort's tactics or anything. But, everything points to that. The Aurors are all there and there have been some preliminary things there and everything . . . I don't know, it just . . . It has to be there."

Harry asked another question and this seemed to be such a non-sequitur that they looked even more confused than before. "What did Dumbledore tell you would happen when we took the portkey?"

Ron answered this time. "Well, he told us that we should take the portkey here, not here but where ever it took us, and then wait 24 hours and then take it back with whatever we found and we would know what to do with it. And he had to say something about the battle, I guess. I mean, I definitely know that when we get back, we'll be fighting. He had to have told us that."

"No, I want to know word for word what he said."

Both Ron and Hermione looked at each other. "It was more than a week ago. I don't really remember." Hermione looked disappointed that she couldn't remember. "It was just . . . there's been so much going on. At the time, I think I was hoping . . . ."

"Come on, Hermione. You can do it. Think for a few minutes and then tell me what he said, exactly. I need to know."

"All right, let me think for a bit." She got up and started pacing, talking to herself as she crossed the room back and forth. Ron smiled at her with affection. Cassie was chewing on her lower lip, watching the girl pace. Harry was trying to decide how best to craft his argument, but knowing that almost everything hung on what Hermione said Dumbledore had told them. "Any chance of my casting a small remembering charm?" she finally said to Harry but when he shook his

head, she smiled. "I knew you'd say that." She paced for about 15 minutes before she finally turned to the three of them and said, "All right. I think I've got it. Ron, you tell me if I get anything wrong."

"Ooh, I'd love to be able to tell the great Hermione Granger she'd made a mistake. It happens so rarely." All four of them laughed and Hermione sat down on the ottoman by Ron and took his hand, getting strength for the ordeal. Harry had the irrelevant thought that she didn't look very comfortable, but he didn't say anything. She looked like she was concentrating hard, and he didn't want to do anything to cause her to forget what she had just remembered.

"Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger. I need to talk to you about a very serious matter." At first, Harry was a little confused but then he realized that she was repeating verbatim what Dumbledore had said and was grateful for her excellent memory. "I know that the two of you are more aware than many of the students of the chaos in the school and in the Wizarding community in general that was caused by Harry's death. I think it will not be much longer before Voldemort and his Death Eaters make what they hope will be a decisive move. To counteract this, I have formulated a plan of my own. Timing is everything, of course." Hermione took a deep breath and cast her mind back again to the time in Dumbledore's office. Ron squeezed her hand in reassurance and she continued.

"I am hoping I will be here to set the plan in motion. However, I cannot assume this will be the case. I need to make sure that someone is aware of how to get the plan started should something happen to me. No, no. Don't panic. I am not saying I will be killed. That is unlikely, although a possibility, I must admit. But, it may be necessary for me to go into hiding or I may be . . . removed. That has certainly happened before. I will wait until the last possible moment if I do need to go into hiding. I am quite certain that a decisive fight is on the horizon. All of my spies and sources tell me it will not be very long now." Hermione smiled at Ron, who nodded encouragingly. Harry was amazed. No wonder she could do well in her classes, if she had a memory this precise.

"I think that you two are the best ones to perform this task for me. This is no small request. It could be dangerous. It certainly will be challenging. But I know that you are up to it. If you ever come here for our customary meeting and I am not here, wait until 5 p.m. and then take this portkey and this piece of parchment. You will find there a certain, uh, secret weapon that will be necessary for the defeat of the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. You are to wait there 24 hours and then take the portkey again, with the weapon. The portkey will take you, if things go as I expect, to the place of battle. For if I am gone, you can be certain that battle will be imminent. This must remain completely secret. Tell no one. Yes, they will be worried when you are gone, but I am sorry to say there are too many spies in the school and you cannot let anyone know what you are to do. The entire plan hinges on this."

Hermione visibly relaxed. "That's it, Harry. He showed us the portkey and the parchment and we left his office. He never mentioned it again."

"So he wasn't sure about the battle? He didn't tell you where the portkey would be taking us?"

"Uh, no. I guess he never did specifically say. It's just that we are positive the battle will be at the Ministry. Everyone says so. But that all started becoming obvious after this conversation. So maybe at the time, he didn't know, either."

"Maybe he charmed the portkey so that it would go wherever the battle is?" Ron offered this as a possibility.

"Is that possible, Hermione?"

"I don't think so. I mean, I've never heard of such a charm . . . but, of course, this is Dumbledore we're talking about. He . . . well, it could be."

"Thank you again, Hermione. You told me what I needed to know before we have this conversation."

"What is this all about, Harry?"



"To get to the point, the battle is not going to be happening at the Ministry. It's going to be happening at Hogwarts."

"How do you know that?" Ron and Hermione both looked very surprised at his statement. Ron spoke quickly. "You can't know that, Harry. You haven't been around . . ."

"I know I haven't been there, but I have heard things - but I think, well, okay, this is going to sound stupid, but I've been having these dreams . . ."

"Harry, do you think, uh, Voldemort is planting these nightmares?" but Harry shook his head. Ron always worried about that. But then, he had been the one who too often had listened for Harry's screams in the night. That couldn't have been very pleasant.

"They're not nightmares, Ron. They're regular, non-screaming sort of dreams. And no, they're not from him. They're just . . .not."

"How can you tell?"

Harry shuddered in response. "I can tell. Besides, if he knew I was here to plant them in my mind, well, I don't think I'd still be here, do you? I've been basically unprotected for three weeks now."

"Well, I seriously hope that your dreams, or visions, or nightmares, or whatever are wrong because if the fight is at Hogwarts . . . . we're dead. There's no one there to fight him. He would just walk in and take over."

"Yeah. Except me. I'll be there. And I'll be a very big surprise. And not a nice one either. And of course you two will be there. Plus, Hermione said that the whole D.A. is there. . . ."

"Well, yeah, but . . ."

"Harry, what makes you so sure about this? Because I have to tell you, I think you are completely wrong. Everyone knows that the battle will be at the Ministry."

"They may all think so, but they're wrong. Dumbledore told me to trust my instincts and I think this is what he meant. Look, I've had three dreams and I wrote them all down as they happened. That's a holdover from Trelawney, but I'm glad I did it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have remembered them."

"Ugh. Did you have to bring up that old bat's name?" Ron made a terrible face and even Hermione frowned.

"No offense, Harry, but Divination? Never your best subject."

"Actually, I hated Trelawney, but I can really do the divination pretty well. I got high marks on my O.W.L.s."

"Hmmm."

"Well, I can understand your skepticism, Hermione, but listen to what I have to say before you decide." She nodded. Harry then told his friends about his three dreams: the one with Voldemort speaking in the Great Hall instead of Dumbledore, the one where Arthur Weasley had been taking him into the Ministry but then it had turned into the entry hall at Hogwarts and then he had turned into Lucius Malfoy and it had all been a trick, and then the one that reminded Harry of he and Ron listening to Dumbledore in Hagrid's hut during second year, the one where Dumbledore said that he would never truly leave the school unless there was no one loyal to him left.

All three of them seemed fairly impressed with the dreams, although it was obvious that Hermione and Ron were still unsure of what all this had to do with the battle's location. "And then, Cassie and I saw a movie."

"A movie?" Ron knew what a movie was, Hermione had talked about them. But this was so out of place in the conversation that he was confused.

"Yeah, you know, a movie. Specifically, a James Bond movie."

"Ooh, Pierce. I love him, he's so good-looking," Hermione commented. Ron gave her an annoyed look, Cassie grinned in agreement and Harry glanced at her in mild surprise before continuing on.

"Yeah, it was a fantastic movie. Ron, sometime, I'd like to take you to see it. You would . . ."

"Harry? The battle?" Ron asked, still looking in annoyance at Hermione who had turned a little pink but was still grinning.

"Oh, sorry. Anyway, the point is that in that movie, the bad guy tried to make the governments, both England's and China's, think that the threat was coming from somewhere else, but in reality, he was the threat. And I think Voldemort is trying to do the same thing."

"What? That didn't make any sense, Harry." That was Hermione.

Ron asked, "You think Voldemort is fighting the Chinese, too?"

Harry just rolled his eyes at that, but paid attention to Hermione. "Let me explain a little more. This guy tried to make everyone look somewhere else as the threat when he was actually doing something completely different. Voldemort made some preliminary moves on the Ministry trying to make everyone think that was the place he was going to attack but it really never was. What would he gain from attacking the Ministry? Nothing. But what would he gain from attacking Hogwarts? Well, okay, I don't know that either . . . but we know he wants it. He's always wanted it and Dumbledore was the only thing that kept it safe. But now he's gone and . . . ."

"Oh, I see. The Ministry was a decoy."

"That's what I think. He wanted everyone's attention on it but he has his forces massed to attack Hogwarts. There are giants in Scotland, also."

"What?!!!" So then, Harry had to tell them about the article in the Sun that he had read with Cassie a few days before.

This did nothing to appease Hermione. "You can't believe anything you read in that rag, Harry. I'm sure Cassie told you that at the time."

"I did." It was the first thing Cassie had said since the start of the conversation.

"I also hope you didn't let him look at the . . ."

"I didn't. But I don't think he was tempted. He seemed more interested in the giants."

"Okay, okay. Look." Harry was blushing. "Be the normal quality of articles as it is, this seemed realistic. The description was very accurate, well, judging by Grawp. And they acted like Hagrid said giants act. I'm fairly sure there actually were two full-grown giants hiking through the Scottish highlands a week or two ago."

"But are they for us or against us?"

"I don't know. I could make arguments for both sides. But it doesn't matter. If they were with them, why would they be in Scotland unless the fight is there? And if they were with us, Dumbledore would have put them where he knew they'd be needed, and they are needed at Hogwarts."

Ron was still not convinced, although Harry felt like Hermione was coming over to his way of thinking. "Look, Ron. It's a giant chess game. Think of it that way." Ron looked puzzled. "When I had to explain the game to Cassie, I had to tell her that the main point of strategy in chess is to make your opponent look somewhere else while you come and checkmate him where he least expects it. And I remembered that last night. And it convinced me that I'm right." At this, Ron's expression cleared.

"That's true. So you think Voldemort is a chess player, huh?"

"Well, I think he understands basic war strategy. He's not an idiot."

"I guess we'll see where the portkey takes us tonight. If it's the Ministry, then we'll know you were wrong, Harry." Hermione didn't

want to have to make a decision on this. She just wanted Dumbledore to have decided.

"No, that's not right, Hermione. If the portkey takes us to the Ministry, I won't stay there. I'll either floo or have someone apparate with me over to Hogwarts. That's where Voldemort is going to be. I'm sure of it."

## Chapter 46

### Departure

#### The Portkey

As the discussion came to a close, the four of them leaned back against the backs of their seats. They were all exhausted, partly from the very rough night, but more because of the energy this last discussion had required. They were all frightened, unsure of where they were going in about six hours and even more unsure of what they would find when they got there. Harry stood up and looked through the front window again. The three Death Eaters were still out there. He wondered if he would have to face Malfoy tonight. Maybe he would be so busy here that he wouldn't come to the battle. He wouldn't complain about that. Malfoy was a vicious fighter. He turned back to his fellow inmates in this little Fidelius prison. They were all looking at him, like they were expecting him to entertain them somehow.

Ron sat up straight again. "You've mentioned playing chess twice. Did you play here?" At Harry's nod, Ron stood up and started looking around. "Where's the board? I'd love to play a game." Harry smiled.

"The board is over on the desk by the phone." Harry watched with a faint smile as Ron approached the board. He wondered if he had forgotten it was Muggle chess. He hadn't seemed interested the night before.

Ron got to the desk and stared open-mouthed at the chess board. He knelt down and looked more closely at the pieces and, finally, took his wand out and prodded one or two pieces with the tip of his wand. "Wow! Weird! These pieces really don't move - at all!" He picked one of them up and turned it over in his hand, looking at it from all sides.

Harry chuckled. "No, not at all."

Cassie had sat up and was looking at Ron strangely. "Um, do you expect them to move? By themselves?" Before Ron could answer, Harry spoke up.

"Yeah. He does. In Wizard Chess, the pieces are animated."

"I don't know how this is going to be, Harry. Is playing this a lot different?" Ron had picked up the board and pieces and was walking over to the coffee table.

"What do you mean by animated?"

"They move and they also talk. It can be a real pain listening to all of your pieces offering you advice and chewing you out if you make a move they don't like." Cassie laughed at the thought of moving, talking chess pieces.

Ron set up the pieces and looked expectantly up at Harry. "Well, how about it? You want to play a game of chess?" Harry was about to agree when he noticed Cassie had turned a shade pinker and was grinning at him. He immediately knew the cause of the blush and grin and felt his face go hot as he turned red. Hermione, who had taken a seat on the couch next to Cassie, noticed the red faces and guilty looks between the two.

"What's all this about?"

Ron looked up from the chess board as Harry and Cassie turned redder and didn't respond. "What's up?"

"Uh, nothing. Besides, I didn't say it on purpose."

"Wait! What did you say?" Hermione was smiling, looking between the two of them. "No secrets, come on. Spill it."

"It's nothing. Did you want to play or not, Ron?"

By then Cassie was giggling loudly and Hermione, who still had no idea what was really going on, was laughing along with Cassie at the silliness of the whole situation. "Come on, Cassie . . . tell us what happened. Come on, Harry said something about chess . . . what was it?" Finally, Cassie, who by this time was beet-red, leaned over and whispered something to Hermione. Brown eyes went wide and her

mouth dropped open in a combination of shock and amusement. She burst out laughing. "You didn't, Harry? You actually said that?"

Harry wanted to slink away in total embarrassment. He, too, was beet-red as he watched Cassie and Hermione laughing and noticed Ron deciding that he also wanted to find out what Harry said. As he sputtered and tried to change the subject, Ron practically flew over to Hermione's side begging her to let him in on the secret. Hermione grinned at both him and Harry and then quietly told him. A very large and wicked grin crept across Ron's face as the reason for Harry's embarrassment sank in. He turned to Harry. "Oh, that's good. You really said 'Let's play chess' to Cassie?"

Cassie had tears of laughter in her eyes although she was still red. Harry couldn't stay mad at her. It had been very funny. He imagined he would hear about this for many years to come. "I'm sorry, Harry. I really am. It was just so funny. And the look on your face. . ." The girls started laughing again and Harry grinned in spite of himself. But he definitely wanted to get off his embarrassment and back to the actual game.

"I should warn you, Ron, I think I've improved dramatically."

"What, playing Muggle chess against a novice? I'm not too worried."

Cassie sniffed at being dismissed as an unworthy opponent and said to Hermione, "He might be surprised. Harry has a secret weapon." Ron looked at her and then at Harry.

"Secret weapon? What's she on about?"

"She got me a book on chess strategy. It's pretty helpful." Harry reached under the table and picked it up, thumbing through it quickly. When he and Cassie had played yesterday, they had both used pointers from the book and Harry had been pleasantly surprised at the improvement in his game from just those few hints. He intended to memorize the thing if necessary. Someday he wanted to beat Ron at this blasted game. By himself with no help from Ginny.



He decided to take the book over to the table in the hall and put it with his wand. He wanted to make sure that he didn't leave it here by accident. He had no idea whether he'd ever be able to get back in here and he wasn't about to take a chance. He was just about to shut the book when he noticed something on the inside cover. He opened it wider and looked in surprise. He didn't know how he had missed this yesterday. Cassie had written a note to him. He decided that he wanted to read it in private.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, okay?" Ron nodded rather absently. Cassie and Hermione were involved in some sort of conversation and Ron was listening to them rather than worrying about Harry. Harry went into his bedroom and closed the door. He opened the book again and stared at the cursive writing he had come to recognize almost as well as his own.

Dear Harry, This is an inadequate thank you for the telescope but there is not much I could give you that would be an adequate one. And this is also a thank you for being my friend. So, it is inadequate on both counts, but I hope that you will use it often and think of me and remember how much you mean to me. I don't know all your big secrets but I do know some things about you. You are wonderful! I don't think people tell you that often enough. Every time you read this note, though, you'll remember that I know it and maybe someday you can find that out for yourself. Please don't forget me. I know I'll never forget you or the time that we've had together.

Love always,

Cassie

Harry sat and stared at the book for a long time. He wondered if she still felt the same now as she did when she had handed this book to him a little more than 24 hours ago. He had felt a shift in their relationship since Ron and Hermione had arrived and he wasn't sure whether it was him that was changing or her or both. He knew that they couldn't go back to before, but he wished that he could think of some way to be that close again. Well, maybe after this insanity was over. There was a knock on his bedroom door and Ron poked his head in. "Coming?"

"Yeah, sorry. I was just, uh, getting some ideas of how to beat you."

"Fat chance that'll happen." The two boys walked back into the living room and Harry said he would play white.

Over an hour later, Harry finally conceded defeat. But he felt proud of himself. He had made Ron sweat a few times. The two boys stretched and put the game into its box. Ron stood up and yawned widely. He smiled at Hermione and then walked over and sat down in the easy chair. He shifted a bit and attempted to get comfortable. "Harry, I still don't see how you were able to sleep in this thing. It's horrible. I'm so tired, I thought I'd sit down and try to get a wink. But I'm not going to be able to sleep . . . yawn . . . in this thing . . . at all . . ." This was followed by a moment or so of silence and then a loud snore. The other three looked at each other and grinned.

Hermione and Cassie glanced at each other and Hermione asked, "Harry, have you thought about lunch?"

"Uh, no. But I really should. It's about 1:30 and we should eat no later than 3:00, I guess."

"Well, Cassie and I will help you get something together."

The three went into the kitchen and Harry busied himself looking to see what he had for them to eat. "I've got some lunch meat and cheese. There's some canned soup. I think there's a bag of frozen potatoes in the . . ." Harry had turned while he was talking and saw both girls quietly talking to each other and glancing at him. He had a sudden, overwhelming feeling self-conscious embarrassment. "Uh, is there a problem?"

Both of the girls looked at him, Cassie blushing a little. Hermione looked at Cassie with an expectant expression and Cassie shook her head. Hermione hardened her expression and Cassie looked pleadingly at her. Harry was not only puzzled but frustrated at the girls' actions. He was very well aware that he obviously was the topic of their whispered communication. "Okay, what's going on?"

Hermione was the first to speak. "Harry, Cassie has something she needs to talk to you about."

Harry had a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was going to figure out now what he had been thinking earlier. Something had definitely changed and obviously Hermione was trying to convince Cassie to tell him. Harry lost all interest in food.

"Go on, Cassie." Hermione softly encouraged.

"Harry, we need to talk. I . . . need to tell you some things."

Harry's sinking feeling intensified and he realized he was weak in his knees. He sat down, inwardly berating himself for reacting the way he was. Hermione muttered something about leaving them alone and Cassie busied herself by starting to fuss with the things Harry had placed on the counter. Harry watched Cassie as she moved around the kitchen, assembling some sort of casserole, although Harry wasn't sure exactly what it was. He could tell that something was wrong between them and he wasn't quite sure what that was either. She didn't say anything for a few minutes and Harry allowed himself to just remember how things had been between the two of them.

He had known from the very beginning that the time would come when he had to leave her. This, however, was turning out to be a little more involved than he thought. Rather than a nice kiss goodbye and a promise to write to each other that would probably never have worked out, who knew what was going to happen now. He had already been thinking that the relationship was going to be very hard to maintain. Now, it was going to be nearly impossible. She knew about his being a wizard and didn't seem overly thrilled about the idea. The thing was, he had to admit to himself, that she was really fantastic and easy to talk to. He had felt like he could be completely honest with her, even before she knew about the magic and everything. He had been able to tell her things that he hadn't been able to ever tell anybody. And she always listened. Now it was his turn to listen to what was bothering her.

She finally said, "Harry?"

"Yeah?" He felt a sudden clenching in his stomach. Now that the moment was upon him, he thought he didn't want to hear this anymore.

"We need to talk." He didn't trust his voice at the moment, so he just nodded but she was turned away at the moment, making some sort of vegetable dish, so she turned to face him a minute later. "Is that okay?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah."

She slipped the two pans into the oven and sat down at the table. She was twisting her hands again in that nervous way that made Harry feel very guilty. He was the one that had put her under this kind of stress. "First of all, Harry, I want you to know that I . . . I got more serious with you than I ever meant to. I knew that you were leaving and I just wanted to keep things kind of, um, casual. But you . . . you made it hard because you, well, you needed . . . me. And I could tell and I . . ." She swallowed hard and he had to listen really hard to hear what she said next. "I have to admit that I fell in love with you, Harry. You're a great guy and I knew . . . well, I feel, like maybe you love me too, at least a little bit."

Harry sat for a long minute staring at her. He didn't know what to say or what she wanted him to say. Did he love her? He knew he liked her a lot. He had admitted that to himself already. But he wasn't sure about loving her. Things had changed so much since last night. She must have thought the same thing because she echoed his thoughts.

"But last night, I . . . I saw something in you that I hadn't seen before." Her blue eyes were clear and open and Harry met her gaze fully. "And it's not the, um, magic or anything. That doesn't make a lot of sense to me, still. But it's like . . . a responsibility. You suddenly turned into this person in charge of things. And I thought it was incredible, to see the difference in you. And I think I fell a little more in love with you because of it." Harry felt a warm glow in the region of his heart. He had so rarely had anyone tell him that they loved him that it still surprised him when someone did. "And then you started telling me these incredible things and I could sense this emptiness in you, this ache. I knew that it would not be easy to stay in touch and everything

after you left, but I didn't care. I wanted to try because I wanted to fill this ache for you. I wanted to be the person who loved you and the one who you loved. I thought that I could . . . make your pain go away."

"I notice that you are talking about all this in the past tense, Cassie." Harry reached for her hand. She was obviously going to dump him. Great. He really hated his life sometimes. This was one of them. He threaded his fingers through hers. If she really loved him, maybe he could convince her to give them a try. It wouldn't be easy, but they were good together. It would work out if they were willing to make an effort. He opened his mouth to tell her as much, to try to persuade her not to leave him, but she started speaking again and after a minute, he closed his mouth and listened to her.

She smiled shakily at him, not bothering to respond to his attempt at lightning the mood. "But then, Harry, I asked you about Ginny. It was more than just casual interest. She seemed to be important to you and I wanted to know about my competition." She laughed. "The way you talked about her, Harry. The tone of voice you use when you say her name. You are so in love with that girl that it's amazing you can see straight. And I decided right then, Harry, that there is no competition. She loves you. You love her. That is where you need to put your attention. She is the one that can . . . love you the way you need to be loved. She can . . . understand you better than I ever could."

Harry spoke up quickly, anxious to show all the flaws in her arguments. "But I've never been able to talk to her like I can talk to you, Cassie. You understand me . . . ." She just shook her head.

"You haven't ever had the chances to talk to her like you have had with me. I imagine that your life at school, and out of it, is pretty full." Harry nodded slowly. "If you took the time to talk to her, you'd feel the same way about her. I'm nothing special."

"I like you, Cassie. I don't want to lose you. I don't -"

"It's not going to be easy for me, either, Harry. It's like ripping my heart out, you understand that? You have to go and do your . . .

fighting and I have to stay here and I guess probably I won't ever hear from you again. But it's how it has to be. It's what I want. And I think, I think that you want it, too." Harry shook his head again.

"No, I want to try to work something out. Muggles and Wizards marry all the time, and -"

"I'm flattered, Harry, but I don't think I'm ready to think about marriage. Are you?"

"Well, no. But we would date first, of course, and . . . ."

"Harry. This is what I want. Do you understand that? I . . . It's just not going to work." Cassie stood up, wiping at her eyes as she stepped over to the stove and checked on the pans inside. "Promise me that you won't try to . . . contact me again after I get back home, okay?"

"No, I'm not going to promise that. I don't want to lose what we have . . . I . . . I don't want to give up on you, on us."

"Harry, when we get back to your school, uh, Hogwarts, you'll see Ginny, right?"

"I think so. She is in the D.A. and Hermione said that everyone is still there."

"Fine. Make sure you see her. You'll know what I mean when you see her."

"She said she doesn't love me anymore."

"She was lying, Harry. I can tell that and I've never even met the girl. Hermione told you that, too. If you don't believe me, at least believe her. She's very smart."

"But how does Hermione know it?"

"Well, Ginny told her, but we girls can kind of tell these things. It comes with the hormones and everything." Harry blushed. "Anyway, when you see her, you'll know what I mean. And you'll be glad. And I

want you to be honest with her, Harry. Tell her what you think. Tell her how you feel. Let her love you. And I'll know. . ." Harry could have sworn that he heard her voice break. "I'll know that there is someone to love you the way you deserve to be loved. And that is what I want for you. Promise me, Harry!" She turned from her fussing at the oven and met his gaze squarely. "Promise."

"Okay. I'll try."

"Well that hardly wins any enthusiasm awards, but I'll take it." She stepped toward him and kissed him on the cheek and Harry could feel the wall she had already put up between them. The almost instant closeness they had shared for the last three weeks was hidden behind it, and he felt its absence sharply. It hurt. But it wasn't the first time he had felt pain. And he would survive. So he took a deep shaky breath and hugged her hard. He couldn't think of anything to say after all that had been said, so he just walked out of the kitchen. He stood for a minute in the hall looking into the living room. Ron was still sleeping but Hermione was staring out the window. Harry briefly considered going into his room and shutting the door but decided against it. Hermione would understand if he didn't say anything and he didn't want to be alone at the moment. He walked into the room.

Hermione turned and looked with an obvious question in her eyes. Harry tried to smile at her, but he didn't think it worked because she looked even more worried. "Oh, Harry! Was it too awful?" He shook his head.

"She's right, of course. It never could have worked between us. I don't think she's too thrilled about the wizard stuff." His words sounded hollow even to himself but he sat down on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

"Is that what she said? 'Cause I don't think that's it, Harry." Hermione left the room quickly and a minute later he heard the two girls in the kitchen. So much for not wanting to be alone. Ron wasn't very good company. He couldn't hear what the girls were saying but maybe that was for the best. He looked at Ron for a minute and thought that maybe he should try to sleep, too. Lunch was supposed to be ready

in about another half hour. He got up, intending to go lay on his bed but when he entered the hallway, he realized his mistake. The door to the kitchen was open a little and he could hear Cassie crying and Hermione muttering little soothing words to her.

"It hurts so bad. I feel like I'm going to die."

"Yeah. I know. I know."

She sobbed again and Harry wanted to push the door open the rest of the way and gather her up into his arms. But he knew that wouldn't help anything and that she wouldn't want him to. He forced his feet to carry him to the bedroom where he lay down on his bed and tried to will himself to sleep.

Try as he might, Harry was not able to go to sleep and, after a half hour, he was almost relieved when Hermione knocked and then tentatively opened the door. She surveyed him and then asked, "Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm okay . . . I think."

"Lunch is ready. You really need to eat so you'll have your strength for . . . tonight."

"I know. I'll come and eat."

"Harry, she's doing it for you. She really cares about what's best for you. It's not because you're a wizard."

"I know."

Harry stood up and, to his surprise, Hermione gave him a big hug. Twice in two days, he thought to himself. This is getting to be a habit. After a moment, Hermione let go, blushing a little. "I thought you needed a hug."

Harry smiled down at her in response and they walked back to the kitchen where they found Ron sitting at the table, still looking sleepy, and Cassie bustling about the kitchen. She turned when they entered



and forced a smile. Her cheeks were a bit flushed but she looked calm and collected. He envied her poise. He didn't think that he looked as unaffected by their talk earlier.

They sat down to what turned out to be a delicious casserole. All three complimented Cassie on her cooking and she genuinely beamed in appreciation. The atmosphere was fairly relaxed and friendly and the small talk around the table was punctuated by laughter. At one point during the meal, Ron turned to Harry. "Well, we know the two of you played chess over the last couple of weeks." He and the girls grinned at Harry who turned suitably red. He then continued. "What else did you do while you were here?"

"Well, we went to the movie I mentioned and we watched some videos. We even went to the British Museum and looked at the Egyptian relics. You would have gotten a kick out of the exhibits." Harry remembered how Ron had talked about the curses and things on the tombs when his family had visited Bill the summer before their third year. He was tempted to mention the old wizard they met there to Hermione but decided that this wasn't the time. He would tell her about it later. "Oh, and we played a really fun game called Scrabble."

Hermione stifled a snicker. "You've never played Scrabble before?"

"No." She should know that. Did she think that he and the Dursleys sat down to play games over the weekends?

"Neither have I," Ron chimed in.

"It really was fun," Cassie agreed. "We had a bet on who'd win the game. I won, but it was close. Harry really came up with some good words. Uh, what were some of them, Harry? I can't remember them right now."

Harry really didn't want to bring up some of the words he'd used. It had been risky then and he had been happy to get away with using them and the Robinsons not catching on. "Oh, well, it's been so long, I don't know if I can remember them."

Cassie was obviously thinking hard about what words Harry had used. Finally, her face lit up and then she got a curious expression. "I should have guessed. You used the word wand and looked at me funny. I wondered for a few minutes." She laughed. .

Harry turned red and had a rather silly expression on his face as both Ron's and Hermione's mouths dropped open and they starred in disbelief at him. Hermione was the first to speak. "You really used the word wand? What were you thinking, Harry?"

"Well, it was a bet. And . . . and, I didn't want her to win."

"So you risked letting Muggles know about you just so you could win some bet over a stupid game? Sorry, Cassie, nothing against you, but . . ."

"No, it's okay," Cassie broke in. She then grinned at Harry. "Besides, it wasn't just wand he used."

"I also used elf, potions, and, uh, giant."

"You used all of those words?" Hermione practically yelled.

Cassie looked a little concerned. "It's okay, Hermione. None of us caught on. My mum thought Harry must be a big Lord of the Rings fan or something."

Ron looked at her. "Lord of the what?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Never mind, Ron. Harry, I can't believe you actually mentioned elves and giants. That was kind of suspicious."

"I just couldn't think of any other words. It's hard under pressure, you know."

Cassie had a surprised look. "I know you said giants exist. Do elves exist?"

"Sure," Ron said, "there's a lot of house elves."

Hermione bristled, "Not house elves, Ron. They're just elves. It's just a habit in the wizarding world to call them house elves."

"Whatever." Harry laughed.

"He also used dragon for a Scrabble word. And, that time we were watching Dragonheart. Harry," Cassie turned toward Harry, who was sitting with his head down a little, shaking it back and forth, "you said dragons were mean and vicious and they don't speak English. Do dragons really exist?"

Ron looked at her incredulously. "Muggles think dragons speak English? Remind me to tell Charlie that one."

Harry smiled at Cassie. "Ron's brother, Charlie, works with dragons."

"So they really do exist? Honestly? Have you ever seen a dragon?"

Ron practically jumped out of his seat with excitement. "Seen one?! He had to fight a dragon one time. It was part of the Tri-Wizard Tournament a couple of years ago. He had to steal a mother dragon's egg. It was wild. Harry was up on his broom flying around and that dragon was trying to take off after him and was breathing fire at him. He got the egg faster than any of the other contestants."

Cassie's eyes were big with amazement, "He had to fly around the dragon and steal an egg? You've got to be kidding!"

Hermione chimed in. "Harry didn't have to fly on his broom. That's how he chose to approach the dragon and get the egg. Harry's one of the best flyers Hogwarts has ever seen."

Cassie looked pretty shocked at the idea of dragons being real. After a few minutes, she asked hesitantly, "They don't have dragons at your school, do they? I mean, I won't have to actually see one or anything?" Ron laughed loudly and both Harry and Hermione glared at him.

"No. Dragons are extinct in Britain. They do live in other countries, but your chances of actually seeing one are very slim." With Hagrid around, Harry couldn't rule out any possibility, but he certainly doubted that she would see one tonight.

At the end of lunch, all four of them helped clean the dishes and kitchen. Harry thought this was probably stupid, but it filled time, and all of them were looking for something to do to keep their minds from dwelling too much on what was going to happen in the next two hours. As they washed the last pan and slid it into the cupboard, Ron sighed with relief. "I'll be glad to be able to use magic again. I've been working like a house elf . . ."

"Don't even start, Ron." Hermione glared at him. He grinned, grabbed her hand and pulled her into his arms. She tried hard to hide the smile that was beginning to creep across her face. Harry and Cassie decided to give the two some privacy and left them in the kitchen. They walked into the living room and were suddenly aware of an uncomfortable awkwardness. Harry didn't quite know what to say or how to approach Cassie under the circumstances. To Harry's relief, she spoke first.

"That was fun visiting. You really fought a dragon? That's absolutely amazing!"

"Well, it was uh . . . interesting. I wouldn't want to do it again, though."

Cassie sat down at one end of the couch and Harry, after hesitating a moment, sat in the chair. The awkward silence returned and they both stared at the door that led to the kitchen, hoping that Ron and Hermione would come through and relieve the tension.

Cassie finally spoke up. "We can still be friends. We can talk and just . . . " She stopped and fought to hold back tears. "You know I care about you."

"I know, Cassie. And, I know you're right. It's just . . . hard."

"I know."

They sat for a few more minutes in silence. Finally, Cassie broke the silence. "Harry, would you answer a rather strange question?"

"If I can."

"Well, both you and Ron are from wizarding families. But Ron seems . . . well, kind of like a fish out of water in the normal or, well, uh, Muggle world. You seem to be a lot more comfortable. And I don't think it's just the three weeks you've been here because I met you right at the beginning and you seemed normal to me. Well, I mean . . . well, I didn't think you were. . . ." Harry laughed. She was obviously trying to avoid saying that wizards were strange.

"Well, Cassie. I was raised as a Muggle. I didn't know I was a wizard until Hagrid gave me my letter. I was raised by my aunt and uncle who are Muggles. My mother was Muggle-born, you see."

"I don't remember you mentioning an uncle."

"Yeah, well, I couldn't tell you too many details. Hiding, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. And I guess that kind of explains it."

Harry smiled at Cassie. They were quiet again for a few minutes, but it was a comfortable silence, the kind that Harry was used to with Cassie. She didn't feel the need to fill every second with small talk and Harry appreciated it. He thought some girls just talked too much. After a minute, though, he looked at the clock and realized that they had better get moving. "Uh, would you like to help me pick things up? I mean, I need to make sure I don't leave anything behind that identifies me. So, I'm going to go around and collect things; put them into a bag or something. That's just in case the Death Eaters get into the house after we leave."

Cassie looked nervous. "How are they going to get in?"

"I don't know and I don't care. We'll be gone." He didn't add on his next thought, that they would see them soon enough. Cassie seemed to take heart at his confidence, smiled, and stood up. The two walked

into the entry hall where they both stopped, embarrassed. In the kitchen, Ron and Hermione were holding each other. She had her head against his chest and he was resting his chin on the top of her head. It was obvious she had been crying; he was talking quietly to her and soothingly rubbing her back. Harry glanced at Cassie and she gave an embarrassed smile. The two walked back to his bedroom. For a moment, Harry felt a little uncomfortable being in a bedroom with Cassie, but quickly realized Cassie no longer felt uncomfortable at the thought of being in a bedroom with him. He didn't know whether to be happy or sad about this. Cassie looked around and then smiled at Harry.

"What can I do to help?"

"Well, you can take all of my shirts and jeans out. I think we'll put them in a pillowcase."

After she had folded his trousers and shirts and stuffed them into an empty pillowcase, he grabbed his pyjamas, socks, and underwear and stuffed them in, too. They had almost finished clearing his bedroom when Ron and Hermione appeared at the door.

"Oh," Hermione said, looking at the pillowcase, "You already thought of it. We were coming back to suggest you get everything together that could give away who was living here. And you are."

"Yeah, I didn't want to take any chances of them learning anything if they actually do get in the place."

"Well, can we help?"

Harry looked at his two friends and smiled. He realized they both were putting on brave faces to cover the growing fear they were all feeling. He also realized Ron and Hermione had added fears since they had finally admitted their feelings to each other. He assumed that explained Hermione's tears; not so much for herself, but for Ron. He smiled reassuringly.

"No, Cassie and I are almost done. Why don't the two of you look around the rest of the house. Make sure we haven't forgotten

anything. Don't even leave anything that has my writing on it. I don't think any of them would recognize it . . . but we can't take any chances. Then we have some final planning to do before we leave."

Hermione left and Harry went into the bathroom where he grabbed his deodorant, tooth brush, toothpaste, and other toiletries. Cassie stood at the doorway with the bag open while Harry tossed them in. They both laughed quite a bit and Harry felt relaxed and happy. They eventually finished and made their way into the living room where, for the next half hour they plotted exactly what each person would do as they were ready to go. Finally, Hermione looked at her watch.

"It's almost time. We better get into the hall."

They all got up and nervously made their way into the entry hall where Harry dropped the overflowing pillowcase. He then picked up Cassie's book and placed it carefully into the bag. He placed the parchment into his pocket and his wand into his trousers. Ron picked up the lion paper weight that had sat on the hall table since he and Hermione arrived the night before.

"This is the portkey. Cassie, all you have to do is stand here and touch it. Even a finger will do."

She nodded and touched it with her left hand. She looked almost disappointed that it didn't tingle or anything. Harry smiled encouragingly at her and got into place next to the door. Ron stood facing the door with his wand out. It had been agreed he would act as back-up to Hermione who was going to perform the actual summoning charm for the invisibility cloak. It had been decided that should the Death Eaters be able to act more quickly than they thought, Ron was going to have to use his wand to block the curses.

Hermione was carefully looking at her watch. "Harry! It's almost time. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! Now, Harry!"

Harry quickly unlatched the various locks and swung the door open. The familiar popping sound could be heard as the house appeared, followed by some exclamations of surprise. At that same moment, Hermione pointed her wand out the door and yelled, "Accio invisibility

cloak!" The cloak came flying through the door and Hermione caught it and began to cram it into the bag on top of all the other stuff. Cassie's eyes were wide and her mouth open with shock. Harry frantically slammed the door and began re-locking all the locks, while sounds of shouts, curses, and bangs could be heard outside. Done with the re-locking, Harry ran to the little huddle and placed his hand on the lion and turned toward the door. Like Ron, he had his wand out and was watching the door carefully. Hermione pointed her wand at the pillow case, shrunk it and stuffed the hand-sized bag into her robe pocket. Then she, too, looked at the door, wand ready to defend them if the Death Eaters came crashing through. Harry heard the doorbell ask calmly for the password and realized that it would only be another few seconds before they were in the house. He had to get out of here! All of a sudden Hermione got a horrified look on her face.

"Harry!"

He turned and looked at her with a combination of surprise and worry. "What?" He could tell she did not have good news.

"Can Muggles portkey?"

Harry's stomach turned and his heart skipped a beat. How could they have not thought about that and talked it through? He looked frantically at Cassie. Her face had changed from concern to absolute panic. She had understood that question well enough. And the loud curses and noises coming from the door certainly did nothing to reassure her.

"I don't know! Hermione! What could happen?"

"Oh, Harry . . . I don't know, either!" Hermione's tone was panicked. It was too late to do anything but hang on and hope.

Harry looked again at Cassie. Her blue eyes were wide with undeniable fear.

And then, Harry felt the familiar tug behind his navel and the room dissolved.



## Chapter 47

Battle:

Hogwarts

They arrived with a pop and piled on top of each other. Harry's glasses were askew and his wand arm was twisted under him. He straightened his glasses with his free hand. He could hear Ron and Hermione under him complaining about being poked by wands and unable to move. He quickly rolled off the top of the pile and helped Hermione up.

"I don't know whether to thank you for helping me up or yell at you for poking me in the ribs with your wand," she mumbled as she tried to straighten her robe, which had become twisted around her legs in the crush.

"Wand in the ribs!" Ron practically yelled as he stood up. "Bloody hell! I'm not even going to tell you where your wand was poking me."

Harry looked at Cassie and his heart skipped a beat. She was laying on the floor, unmoving, eyes closed and very pale. He bent over her apparently lifeless form and shouted, "Cassie, Cassie!" as he shook her frantically.

As Ron and Hermione bent over her in consternation, Cassie opened one eye and looked up at them. She asked in a quivering voice, "Are we there yet?" The other three stared at her in surprise and then burst out laughing. She also laughed, in spite of herself, and shakily sat up. "No wonder you hate traveling that way, Harry It's horrible. I thought I was being turned inside out." She stood and brushed herself off, looking around in amazement at her new surroundings.

Now that the immediate danger to Cassie had passed, the three friends glanced around and immediately realized they were in Dumbledore's office. Although the office was empty, there was a loud and continued buzz of whispering and some outright loud talking among the various paintings. They could hear exclamations such as "It's the Potter boy;" "It's Harry Potter;" "It IS Potter;" "Wait until the

Fat Lady hears this;" "I wish I could get into my painting in the Ministry," and the like. Harry felt a sudden thrill of terror. The gossiping paintings could ruin the whole plan - after coming all this way! What else could possibly go wrong?

Hermione suddenly pulled out her wand, waved it around the room, and said, "Petrificus tabulus!" The figures who had already moved from their painting into others on the way out the door were trapped where they were. None of the painted figures could move, even back into their own painting. A roar went up from the various occupants - "Hey, that wasn't nice;" "How impudent, Young Lady;" "I don't want to be trapped in here with her! Let me at least go back to my own painting;" "Well, I didn't ask you to come into my painting, did I?" and "How long are you going to keep us this way?" Harry tried frantically to count all the paintings and the figures to make sure that all were accounted for, but gave up after a few moments. It seemed that these past headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts moved very slowly and that Hermione had managed to stop them all before any had left the room.

Hermione scowled at the various muttering and screeching paintings. "Quiet! or I'll put a silencing charm on all of you!" The talking ceased, except for a mutter here and there. Suddenly, though, Harry heard a voice he hadn't heard in almost a year and he wanted to ask Hermione to put a silencing charm on him at least.

"Well, well, well. Harry Potter. I thought you were keeping my great-great-great-grandson company." He didn't seem too happy to see Harry back among the land of the living. Harry wasn't too happy to hear from him, either. He just brought back a lot of bad memories.

"Phineas Nigellus. Still here, I see. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm still here, too. Look, I don't have time to deal with you right now. So shut up." Harry knew he was being rude, but their relationship was based on rudeness and mutual dislike and Harry saw no reason to change anything now. Phineas didn't say another word and the other paintings seemed to reconcile themselves to their new locations and settled down to watch the drama unfolding before their eyes. Cassie was still looking around, her blue eyes huge in her face. Ron had

already walked over to Dumbledore's desk and placed the lion they had used as a portkey back in its customary place.

"It's strange being here with Dumbledore gone. I don't like it . . . it's creepy." Hermione walked over to stand by Ron, wrapping her arms around herself like she was warding off a chill. Harry barely suppressed a shudder himself. He remembered very distinctly the last time he had portkeyed to Dumbledore's office. That time, he had been alone and Sirius had been dead for only a few minutes and Harry had wanted to die himself. He glanced around at all the little delicate silver objects around the office. He had smashed them all to bits that morning, taking out all his anger and hatred on the beautiful little things. He imagined that Dumbledore had been able to fix them all. He hoped so. He felt a pang of guilt. He had never apologized to Dumbledore for all that rampant destruction. If he . . . , no, when he saw Dumbledore again, he would make sure to tell him how sorry he was for that morning. He shook his head as if to wipe away a memory. He needed to concentrate on today. Or he would be keeping Sirius company. And at this moment, he wasn't in a big hurry to do that.

Cassie had walked over to where Ron and Hermione were, collapsing into one of the big chairs in front of the desk.

"I need a minute or two to . . . take everything in. Are we really at your school, Harry? Are we really in Scotland? I . . . I just can't believe this."

"Yeah, Cassie. We're at Hogwarts." Harry turned to Hermione. "I'd like my cloak, please."

Hermione took the small pillowcase out of her pocket, and threw it toward Harry, who caught it easily. "Could you do the engorgement spell, please?" Hermione looked at him funny.

"Do it yourself." Hermione was still studying him carefully and Ron had turned from Dumbledore's desk at the strain in her voice.

"Oh, yeah." Harry stared at his wand for a moment. It was still clutched in his hand but he had never even thought to use it. He hadn't used magic now for more than three weeks, and truthfully, he

wasn't sure that he could. What if he waved his wand and said the words, and nothing happened? He swallowed hard. He wasn't sure he wanted to try. If he failed, he wasn't sure what he would do. He wished he could feel a tingling or something, but nothing. His wand felt familiar and yet strangely alien in his hand. He bit his lip. He needed to do it. He was back at school and could. But the feeling of dread at the imagined upcoming failure was growing into a huge fear. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Go on, Harry. You remember the words, don't you?"

"Yeah, I just . . . . Engorgio!" Stupid as it was, when the bag expanded to its original size, Harry almost whooped in excitement. He was still a wizard. He laughed in sudden relief, the sound echoing around the office, waking the few occupants of the frames that had managed to go back to sleep. He was back home, back at Hogwarts, and even though he didn't know what was going to be happening in the next few hours, he found that he really didn't care. He could do magic! Life was good.

Harry savored the feeling of intense pure joy that flooded his being at that moment and locked it away. It was a good Patronus casting memory. He tried to save those when they happened. They were rare. Just for fun, Harry cast a few summoning charms at various objects around the office, laughing as the pillows and books obeyed his wand and landed at his feet. He laughed again at the still-shocked expression on Cassie's face and then, just for the hell of it, sent all the objects back, making sure nothing went back where it was supposed to. If he lived through the day, he would personally come back up here and fix it all. And he would love doing it. Hermione was clucking in disapproval at the mess Harry was making of the office. "Don't worry, Hermione! This is nothing. Dumbledore's used to me by now!" Harry sent the last colorful throw pillow up into a slot in the tall bookcase that lined a wall and sent the book that was supposed to go there over into an overstuffed chair. Then he made the book soft and fluffy and threw himself into the chair, stretching his legs out in front of him in utter abandon, thrilled at the pleasure he felt at the moment.

Ron was looking at him like he really had lost all his marbles, and Harry grinned at him, realizing he looked like a stupid fool, but not

caring in the least. "I hate to interrupt your fun, Harry, but I think there's a war going on. Maybe we should check?" Harry instantly sobered. He had forgotten for a few minutes. The battle might be going on right now and he was sitting up here in the Headmaster's office throwing pillows around. He stood up and grabbed his cloak out of the pillowcase-cum-luggage. Cassie had been watching him with intense concentration the entire time, and Harry grinned triumphantly at her.

"Magic, Cass!" and then he threw the cloak over his head and he was gone. Her gasp echoed in the sudden stillness.

"Harry? Where are you?" There was a note of panic in her voice as she stared hard at the spot where he had been a second ago.

"I'm here, Cassie. Don't worry." His voice was over by the window, and she whirled as though expecting to see him, but of course, he was just as invisible there as he had been in the middle of the room.

"I can't believe that . . . It's . . . It's really amazing."

"It is, isn't it?" Hermione had come up next to her. "It still surprises me sometimes, and I've seen him disappear beneath it so many times that I couldn't count them."

"Well, Harry? What's going on out there?" Ron had no patience at the moment for games or small talk. He knew what they would be facing and the fear in his voice sobered Harry up quickly.

"Nothing. There's absolutely nothing going on out there at all. The school might as well be completely abandoned for all I can tell from here." Harry felt extremely nervous, now. What if he was wrong? What if somehow everything was messed up? For all they knew, the battle could have already happened. He trusted that Dumbledore knew what he was doing, but the situation could have changed drastically from the time he set up the portkey until now. Maybe things had not gone the way Dumbledore had expected. "I'm sure we're safe here in the office, but we need to figure out what's going on, and the sooner the better." Harry glanced at his two friends and realized that he was still wearing his Muggle clothing. "I'd better put

my robes on. We may need to go out and scout. Um, are my things still up in Gryffindor Tower?"

"Harry . . ." Oh, no. Hermione was speaking in her prefect voice, the one that she used when she didn't want to call Harry stupid but wanted to make sure he did things that way she wanted him to.

"What?" He tried to keep his frustration in check. He wanted his robes.

"You can't go out there. It's too dangerous. Ron and I can go, but you can't."

"I can go out under the cloak." He wasn't about to sit here while they went into possible danger. "But I need my robes."

"Your trunk is here, but . . . ."

"Good." Harry looked around and saw it in a corner. He didn't know how he had managed to miss it earlier. He walked over to it and opened the lock with a quick "Alohamora." He opened the lid and smiled. He had missed his things. Yes, that probably sounded stupid, but as the familiar smell of his trunk -- books, parchment, quills and ink, the special smell of elf-washed laundry, and his Firebolt - hit his face, he felt instantly at home. He held his hand over the trunk and said "Up." His Firebolt instantly rose into his hand and he smiled even broader. He had perhaps missed flying worst of all.

"Show-off," Hermione said. They all laughed. Hermione had a well-known dislike of brooms and flying. And it had all started back at their very first flying lesson, when Harry had said "Up," and his school broom had flown into his hand. It had taken Hermione forever to get her broom to respond, and even then it was begrudgingly. She had taken it as a personal insult.

Harry set the Firebolt on the floor, and looked back into the trunk. His Quidditch robes were folded neatly under the broom. Normally, of course, the robes hung in the changing rooms by the pitch but during the off season, each player kept the robes with their own personal possessions. He fingered the rich scarlet material softly and then picked up the robes and shook them out.

Cassie had stepped over to the trunk when he opened it and now she smiled at the look on his face. "That's beautiful."

"Thanks. They're my Quidditch robes."

"Oh. That must be pretty impressive to see when you play." Harry nodded. He loved the Gryffindor colors the most - and he didn't think it was just prejudice on his part. The red was impressive when the whole team was out there playing.

Harry looked into the trunk again. His plain black school robes were folded neatly and he grabbed one off the top of the pile. "Who packed my trunk? I know it wasn't you, Ron. Everything would just be wadded up in here."

"Hey!" Harry smiled at his friend.

"I'm just joking."

"It was both of us, Harry. Dumbledore was going to have the elves do it, but we wanted to."

"Thanks, you did a good job." Harry swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. He slipped his arms into the sleeves and instantly felt more comfortable at the familiar feeling of his robes. "Hey, let's use the map! We can probably get a good idea of what is going on around the school just by seeing who is here and what they are doing." He started looking through the rest of the trunk. Before he could look far, he heard Ron stammer,

"Uh, Harry? Your map isn't in there."

"What? Where is it? Did someone take it?"

"Well, yeah. Me."

"Oh." Harry gulped. He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "Where is it now?"

Hermione glanced at Ron who stammered again. "I hope you won't be angry, I mean, we thought you were dead and . . . well, you wouldn't care would you?"

Harry was just anxious to know where his map was. "What are you on about, Ron?"

"When we were packing, we kept out a couple things that we thought would be better used than just sitting in your trunk. One was your map. It's upstairs in my trunk right now."

Harry was relieved at that news. "All right. What was the other thing?"

Ron rolled his eyes and this time, it was Hermione's turn to stammer and look embarrassed. "Well, it's . . . it's my fault. Ron thought I was silly, but Ginny liked it."

Harry felt his patience waning. "Will you just get on with it?"

"Well, we went through your things, folding everything, putting your books, robes and broom in. Ron decided to keep the map and then I saw that shirt." Harry's eyes narrowed, trying to remember what shirt she meant. Hermione could tell he was confused. "Remember the green shirt Mrs. Weasley made for you the last time you were at the Burrow?" Harry nodded. He remembered now. "Ginny really liked you in it. She told me once when you wore it. Well, I gave her the shirt to remind her of you. She really appreciated it. She, uh, sleeps in it at night. It's a girl thing, Harry."

Harry nodded and looked away. He felt his face going red. He didn't know if he was blushing because of the fact that Ginny slept in his shirt or because of the images he had of Ginny sleeping in his shirt. Either way, he figured he better focus his attention on something else. "Well, she probably looks better in it than I did. And that's fine. But we are going to need the map. Soon."

"Do you want me to go get it now?" Ron asked, glancing at the door.



"No. Let's come up with some ideas first of what we want to do. That way, when you go out, you can do some of the preliminary scouting. You can take the cloak, of course."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"No. You did the right thing, Ron. After all, that map is . . . well, it was important to my dad and Sirius and . . . it shouldn't have just been sitting in a trunk. Besides, I would have wanted you to have it. Anyway, if Dumbledore eventually gave my stuff to the Dursleys, I bet they would have just burned the whole thing and then . . . well, you did the right thing. I'm not mad. We just need it for today, I think." They all stood quietly for a minute, each with their own thoughts. Finally, Harry broke the silence. "We need to do some battle planning." They all nodded and returned to the chairs. As there were only three and none of them felt comfortable sitting in Dumbledore's chair, Ron sat in one and pulled Hermione onto his lap. Cassie took the chair she had previously occupied and Harry sat in the other. Harry set the tone of the conversation.

"Okay, Hermione. You told me there are hardly any teachers left at Hogwarts. Most of the students are gone, except for the Slytherins and, of course, the DA. That means we have, what, maybe 30 or 35 people altogether to help us out?" Ron and Hermione nodded. It seemed so few people to defend this whole castle. Especially when the majority of that small force was students. "And, on top of that, we need to watch our backs because of the Slytherins. So, what can we do?"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other and then Ron spoke. "Well, we need to get the DA together. Maybe we can have them hide in places in the castle and then as they enter we can blast them."

Hermione shook her head. "No, it would be bad if they even got into the castle. Let's have the DA hide right inside the door and then go charging out and down the steps when they're coming up the lawn."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "I like the idea of the battle being out in the open ground where we can see them. I like Ron's idea of blasting them in a sudden movement. Maybe we can have everyone fire at

once. So, should I go out right away? I mean, I guess I could kind of be in the front when we charge out of the castle. It might throw them off enough that we can get some good curses in before they can react."

Hermione looked engrossed in deep thought. Finally, "How about we go out of the castle and then you come after it's all started. That way, none of them are expecting you and then you'll really surprise them. Harry, you know that's the only way you can get Voldemort -- by surprise. The two of you can't duel with your wands."

Harry noticed Cassie had a bewildered look on her face from Hermione's last statement. She started to open her mouth to ask a question and then shut it again, obviously deciding to wait. Harry would have explained, but it would have taken a lot of time, and right now, that was one thing they didn't have a lot of.

Ron was nodding. "Yeah, Hermione's right. But, I think it might be better if you come from around the castle with some of the DA. You know, hit 'em from two different directions and surprise 'em at the same time."

Cassie broke into the conversation and all eyes turned to her. She blushed a little, hesitated for a moment and then plowed ahead. "Those are good ideas about surprising them and hitting them from different directions. But Harry, I don't think you should be on the ground." Harry immediately wondered if she didn't want him in the battle at all. He was about to disagree when Cassie continued on. "Hermione mentioned earlier that you're one of the best flyers Hogwarts has ever seen. You fought the dragon by flying. You should fight Voldemort the same way. He won't be expecting it and you can really surprise everyone."

All three of the others looked at Cassie in amazement and Harry's eyes lit up. "Yeah! I like that idea. Let them aim their curses at me. I'll be up where I can maneuver easily and weave and dive and all that."

Ron stood up suddenly, sending Hermione to the floor. He looked down with an embarrassed expression, helped her up and into the seat. "Sorry, Hermione. Look, Harry, if you're flying, I'm flying out with

you." Hermione caught her breath and looked at Ron with a concerned expression. She then appeared to mentally harden herself, smiled at Ron and then looked at Harry.

"It's a good idea, Harry. And Ron should be with you."

"Are you sure? It's going to be dangerous."

"Harry," Ron spoke up, his face turning the color of his hair, "Whatever we do is going to be dangerous. But we've fought them before. We can do it again. I'm there with you."

"I know, Ron. I'd like that."

Cassie smiled at them, even though it was obvious she was scared for them. She got up from her chair, walked over to the trunk where the Quidditch robes were lying and picked them up. She turned to Harry.

"And Harry, you need to wear your Quidditch robes."

"What? No. I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, this isn't a game, for one thing."

"When you go out to play though, you're willing to give everything you have to win, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I . . ."

"Well, this is a time when you have to go out and give it everything you've got again. Besides, maybe it will surprise them enough that it will help a little."

Harry looked at Ron. "What do you think?" Ron shrugged, but Hermione spoke up quickly.

"I like the idea. It's a little psychological dig at them anyway. You know how much they hate Gryffindor house."

"Well, all right. That's it, then. I'll do it."

"Well, if you are, I am." Ron sounded very determined, like he didn't want anyone to try to talk him out of it. Harry looked at Ron and smiled.

"Are your robes up in the tower?"

"With my broom, yeah."

The four of them talked for a few more minutes about exactly how this was going to work and then Harry said, "Ron, you need to get to the tower and get the stuff. You need the map, your broom . . . ."

"And my Quidditch robes.," Ron cut in.

"And your robes, of course. Then get back here as fast as you can. Don't talk to anyone and don't let anyone see you. Here, you can use my invisibility cloak." He handed the cloak to Ron who took it, turned and kissed Hermione, pulled the cloak over himself and left.

Cassie looked at the door Ron had exited for a few moments. She turned to Harry. "You should have told Ron to look for Ginny."

"What?"

"Ginny, Harry. You still need talk to her. You know you do."

Harry flushed a little. "I don't think this is the right time for me to be worrying about this."

"I think you're just procrastinating."

"Yeah, maybe. But I don't want to be thinking about this rather than the fight. I can't afford to be distracted." But despite his words, he was thinking about it. His stomach turned a little at the thought of Ginny being in what would undoubtedly be a very violent and horrible battle.

He hoped that they both survived to the end of it so he could try to tell her again how he really felt about her. He knew she'd be there with the rest of the DA. In fact, with the three usual leaders out of the picture - at least in the minds of the rest of the group - she would logically be the next in line to lead. They had organized the DA with a long chain of command in case one, two, three, even four or five of the students were gone or put out of commission. That way, there would still be someone there to lead the others.

Harry and Hermione both sat nervously in the chairs they had been sitting in before. There wasn't much they could do, now, until Ron got back with his things. Harry hoped that he didn't get out into the corridors and decide that it was too dangerous to go up to the tower. Now that they had a plan, he wanted to follow it through. He really liked the idea of flying out and he didn't want to do it alone. He could, but he really didn't want to.

Cassie tried sitting for a few minutes, also, but kept looking around so much at the various things in the office, that Harry finally said, "You can get up and look around if you want to. He wouldn't mind."

She smiled shyly, as if embarrassed that he caught her looking, and stood up. The first place she went was to the tall bookshelves, studying several of the titles of the impressive books. Harry watched her as she pulled one out and opened it. "It's not in English." She put it back and looked at a few more before she moved around to look at some other things. She studied the little silver objects around the room with interest, but Harry didn't volunteer any information. He honestly didn't know what they were for, either. She looked at the various portraits as she walked by them and they all smiled at her. Harry didn't keep looking at her as she moved out of sight behind his chair. He was watching the door. He felt like it was time that Ron should be back from his errand and the fact that he wasn't was making him extremely nervous. After a few moments, though, he heard a startled gasp and both he and Hermione turned to see what she was looking at. She had noticed, in a corner, something that was rather hard to overlook, even though no one had really paid much attention before. It was Fawkes, sitting quietly on his perch. Harry wasn't sure the bird had been there the whole time.

"That's Fawkes. He's a Phoenix."

"He's beautiful. I always thought Phoenixes were just a myth. Does he really burn and then rise from the ashes?" She was staring entranced at the amazing plumage. Harry remembered the first time he had seen Fawkes. He had been less than impressed and then the bird had burst into flame right in front of his eyes and practically scared him to death.

"Yes, he does. Be grateful you're not seeing him on burning day. He's really homely then." There was a squawk of protest from Fawkes and Harry quickly added. "But he's really incredible. He's saved my life many times." Harry fingered his wand. It was one of Fawkes' tail feathers that was the core of his wand, also, but he didn't want to bring that up. Cassie had reached a trembling hand up to the bird, who nibbled obligingly at her fingers. Just then, Ron appeared at the doorway to the office. He was holding his broom in his hand and his robes and the cloak were draped over his arm. He looked flushed and a little agitated.

"I know you told me not to tell anyone, and I didn't tell her anything other than to get her broom and Quidditch robes. But, I thought she might . . . Well, anyway, I brought Ginny back with me."

## Chapter 48

Battle: "They're Coming in through the Gates!"

As Ron made this announcement, Ginny stepped into the doorway. She looked at Hermione who was standing closest to the door and smiled. She opened her mouth to say something and then looked past Hermione and saw Harry. Harry had expected her to smile and be at least happy to see him, if not ecstatic. Instead, she went white and then red. She dropped her broom and robes and turned to Ron. She punched him in the stomach, and Ron doubled over, gasping in complete and utter surprise. "How could you do this to me?!" Harry was trying to figure out exactly what she meant and decided that she meant his surprising her with Harry's presence, but then Ginny left Ron standing in the doorway trying to catch his breath and stalked (that was the only word for it) over to Harry. She pulled her hand back and slapped him, hard. "Who are you? How dare you!" She whirled around and faced Hermione, who was looking shocked but was also laughing. "Who is this? What is the meaning of this?" She turned on her heel to face Harry again and pulled back her hand for another whack.

Harry reacted with a Seeker's instincts and grabbed her fist before he got the same treatment as Ron, who had just barely stood straight again. He twisted her arm down and she reacted by pulling her hand back and turning, trying to free her herself. Harry pulled her closer to him, and wrapped his arms around her squirming body. He bent down and whispered into her ear, "Hey, Little Firecracker. It's really me." That was a nickname he had given her a few months ago when she had gotten angry at one of the professors and Harry had told her that she reminded him of a firecracker, exploding quickly and making a lot of noise. She had not been amused at the time, but since then, it had become a little endearment and she didn't complain. She also had never told anyone and as far as Harry knew, he was the only one who knew about the pet name. She relaxed instantly in his arms and he loosened his hold. She turned to face him again and Harry smiled broadly at her. It was so good to see her. He opened his mouth to tell her as much when she pulled her fist back and hit him in the stomach. He doubled over in shock and surprise, barely registering Ron's sudden barking laughter in the background.

"Where the hell have you been?!" Harry gasped, trying to get enough air into his lungs and thinking that if every welcome back from the dead he got from his friends was similar to the two he had had so far, he was going to have to visit Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing on a regular basis over the next few days. He heard Ron and Hermione talking to Ginny but didn't pay that much attention to what they were saying. He just concentrated on trying to stand up. Who would have guessed that her tiny frame could pack so much strength behind a punch? By the time he caught his breath and stood up, gingerly testing his ability to take a deep breath, she had apparently been appeased, because though her face was still pale, she looked a lot more calm and unlikely to hit him again. When she rushed back over to him, Harry wasn't sure whether to embrace her or protect himself. She answered his question by throwing her arms around him and holding onto him like she would never let go again. Harry slowly let his arms go around her, this time actually hugging her as she stammered apologies for hitting him - twice. It was only then that he looked around the room for Cassie. She was sitting in the chair in the corner, watching the two of them and she was laughing quietly with a very big smile on her face. Harry thought that she probably had been pretty amused watching him being slapped and punched - it was something she probably would have done under the same circumstances.

Ginny was crying, now. "I promised myself that if I ever had a chance to do it over with you, I'd grab you, hold you, and kiss you with everything I had . . . but instead I punched you! I can't believe it. I'm so sorry!!" She looked up at him with her big brown eyes still registering disbelief. Harry met her gaze squarely.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny. I knew how much . . . everyone would be hurting. I heard you had a really rough time of it, and I'm sorry." She looked away, flushing slightly.

"Yeah, well . . . I'm glad you're back. We all missed you."

Harry pulled her back into his arms and kissed her gently on the cheek. "I missed you, too." She turned her face and stared at him for a moment and then gave him a soft kiss which he happily



reciprocated. After a minute, they separated and looked at each other in surprise. Harry was about to kiss her again when Ron cleared his throat.

"Uh, Harry. I'm glad you're enjoying snogging my little sister, but we have a battle to fight in a very short while."

"What? Oh, yeah . . . uh, sorry. Yeah, we need to do some, some planning." Everyone in the room sharpened their attention on what needed to be done. Harry slipped into the role he was so used to taking in these circumstances. He was in charge. "Okay, everyone. We're pretty sure Hogwarts is going to be attacked tonight. We're not sure what time but assume it will be any time between 6:00 which is right about now and 7:00. We can also assume we're not going to have many people defending the castle other than us, a few teachers and the DA. That makes about what, thirty people?"

Ginny seemed surprised at the last statement. "I don't know, Harry. I think we're going to have more people here than you expect."

"What do you mean, Ginny?"

"Well, this morning Snape came by the Gryffindor table and whispered to me to get up to the commons room as soon as possible because I was going to have a visitor. I hurried up there and there was Dad's head in the fire."

Cassie gave a noticeable start at the mention of a head in a fire and Ginny seemed to realize for the first time there was a fifth person in the room -- someone she didn't know. She smiled at her inquisitively and Hermione jumped in, "This is Cassie, she's a friend and is here to uh . . . help us."

"Oh, good. Hi. Well, anyway, dad told me to let the DA know they should all be in the entry hall no later than 6:00 p.m. He said we're going to act as support in the battle. I sent the message around to the DA. In fact, I was just getting ready to go down there myself when Ron found me. But, what I'm trying to say is Dad wouldn't warn us to be ready for a battle and be prepared to act as support if there

weren't going to be others there. I think we'll at least have members of the Order."

"The Order?" Cassie asked.

Harry looked at her and smiled reassuringly. "The Order of the Phoenix. They're organized to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters." Turning to the rest, Harry continued Ginny's line of thinking. "I think you're right, Ginny. Ron, you got the map?"

Ron nodded and pulled the parchment from a pocket. He handed it to Harry who placed it on the desk and unrolled it. Everyone gathered around and looked at the completely blank parchment. Harry took out his wand and tapped the parchment while saying, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." Cassie got a rather shocked look on her face and Harry grinned. "Don't worry, it's okay. It's just that my dad and his school mates had an odd sense of humor."

They all looked back down and there coming into sight was the plan of Hogwarts Castle and grounds with the secret tunnels. All five gave an involuntary gasp of shock at what they saw. It was Harry who spoke. "I can't believe it. The sneaky . . . They must have been planning this for weeks!" The tunnels leading into the castle were full of little black dots, each of them labeled with a familiar name. The professors who had apparently deserted the school to go fight at the Ministry were all in the tunnels. Many members of the Order were there also, apparently waiting for some signal to emerge and defend the school. They amused themselves for a few minutes reading the little names.

"There's Mum and Dad!" exclaimed Ginny.

"And Bill, and, blimey, even the twins," remarked Ron.

Hermione was quickly scanning the map and named off a number of teachers who had previously and very publically left Hogwarts for London. " Look, there's McGonagal, and Flitwick, and Vector and Sprout."

Harry's heart skipped a beat as he saw Remus Lupin, Mad-Eye Moody, Mundungus Fletcher and a number of other members of the Order. Everyone was waiting for the right moment to emerge and defend Hogwarts. Harry looked in vain for Dumbledore. There was no dot labeled with his name, but Harry was pretty confident he would be there if he could. He hoped so. He wasn't sure how they could do this without him.

He turned to the others. "It looks like Hogwarts is going to be well defended. That's a relief. But now we need to figure out what we're supposed to do."

"Well, we're going to ride out, aren't we, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, we are. We just need to figure out when."

Ron looked puzzled. "What do you mean when? Let's get out there as soon as we see the bad guys. The sooner we get out there the better,"

"No. I don't think that's what Dumbledore wants. I think he wants me to appear when it's best for us. I just don't know when and what's going to give me the signal; or if there even will be a signal. I just think I'm supposed to appear at a point in the battle when it'll surprise everyone."

Ron grinned at Harry in a morbid way. "Believe me, mate, you'll surprise everyone, no matter when you appear. I just hope you don't surprise our side as much as you will the others. I'd hate to see some of our defenders fall over with heart attacks." Everyone had a good chuckle over that and Ginny, who was standing next to Harry, flushed bright red again.

"At least you'll be on a broom and they can't hit you." Everyone laughed a little louder at that.

Hermione finally broke in through the laughter, bringing them back to the point. "I think Harry's right. I think Dumbledore would want Harry to make a grand entrance at some point in the battle. You just need to figure out when, Harry."

"I know. Dumbledore said I need to follow my instincts. So, I guess that's what I'll have to do. Hopefully it works. Uh, Hermione, could you take a look out the window and see what's going on. It's already a little after 6:00."

Hermione made her way to the window while the others watched. She peeked out and reported nothing new. There was an audible sigh of relief from the others. Harry then continued the battle planning.

"Okay. So, Ron, Ginny and I'll fly out through the windows. Hermione, you need to get down and help direct the DA as soon as we go. Cassie," Harry turned and looked at her with obvious concern, "You better stay in here. You'll be safe here in case . . . well, in case anything should . . . well, you know."

Cassie had a hurt but defiant look on her face. "No way, Harry. I'm going down with Hermione."

Ginny looked at Harry in puzzlement. "Harry, we need everyone we can get." Turning to Cassie she asked, "Do you have your wand? How good are you at defensive spells? Can you cast a patronus or anything?"

Cassie blushed a little and stared at Ginny with wide eyes, unsure of what Ginny was talking about. Hermione came back over from the window and saved her. "Uh, Ginny, Cassie's a Muggle."

"Oh," Ginny said as she looked at Cassie with a new understanding. She smiled at Cassie, who smiled in return and, while still smiling, asked, "Then why is she here?"

Cassie's smile slipped a little. "You can speak to me. I'm a Muggle but I'm not an idiot. I'm here because I had to come. I was trapped with Harry when Ron and Hermione came to get him."

A look of dawning comprehension splashed across Ginny's face and she too began to blush. "Oh, I . . . I, didn't know about that. I'm, well, I'm sorry, Cassie."

Harry's stomach turned over and he was about to say something when Hermione put her hand on Ginny's shoulder and soothingly said, "We can explain more later, Ginny. Cassie was visiting with Harry when we went to get him and then Death Eaters showed up. She couldn't get out of the house so we had to bring her with us. She's really nice. I'm sure you'll like her."

Cassie glanced at Hermione in gratitude and Ginny relaxed a little. She looked at Cassie with an expression of self-conscious embarrassment. "Cassie, I'm sorry if I offended you. I don't have anything against Muggles. We weren't brought up that way. I was just wondering why you were here. I thought you were going to help . . . ." She stopped, unsure of where to go, since she basically had backed herself into a corner where she was going to have to say that Cassie was pretty well useless if she continued.

"It's okay, Ginny." Harry was glad that Cassie was naturally a friendly person or she might be the one doing the hitting this time around.

Ginny looked at the others with a concerned expression. "We need to hide the fact she's a Muggle. You know what'll happen if they catch her." The others nodded and again Cassie went white at the insinuation of what they would do to her. Ginny turned and looked at Cassie directly as she undid her black robe and handed it to her. "Here are my robes. I'm going to be wearing my Quidditch robes anyway. Put them on and pretend you're, uh, a witch. Don't let anyone know you're a Muggle."

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione. "What's Dumbledore's password now in case things don't go well and Cassie has to come back here? She'd be safe here."

Ron grinned at Harry. "You'll love the new password. It's canary cremes." He, Harry and Ginny chuckled at that. But Hermione broke in, trying to concentrate on what was really going on.

"Harry, I don't think Cassie will be able to find her way back up here; even if the battle does go badly."

"Well, maybe not, but at least she has it - just in case. Remember, Cassie, canary cremes."

Cassie nodded but had a rather bewildered look on her face. Harry then turned back to Hermione. "When the two of you get down to the entry hall, hide her in that big broom closet." Hermione nodded in reply and Cassie scowled.

Harry looked at one of Dumbledore's clocks (they did actually tell time, he thought) and then asked Hermione the time to make sure. She announced it was 6:15. They looked at each other with a mixture of anticipation and foreboding. Harry then asked Hermione to go and look out the window, which she did.

"Oh, Harry! I see some people right outside the gate. There, another just apparated. Two, no three, no, five more just apparated. I can't really see them too well, so I don't know who they are, but . . ."

"Wait," Harry said, his eyes lighting up. He hurried to his trunk and rummaged feverishly through it until he came up with the pair of Omnioculars he'd purchased at the Quidditch World Cup. He handed them to Ron who hurried to the window and sidled up next to Hermione. He adjusted the Omnioculars and began looking at the various Death Eaters in the front of the pack.

"Hey, I see those big lugs, Crabbe and Goyle. I see McNair, and the LeStranges. Oh, there's Malfoy, that bloody bast..."

"Ron!" Hermione cut him off mid-sentence.

"Well, it's true. He is a bloody bas..."

"Ron! It may be true, but you don't need to say it." Hermione glared at him while both Cassie and Ginny did their best to hide the smiles on their faces. She took the Omnioculars from Ron, who knew well enough to retreat while he could.

"Oh, Harry, there must be somewhere between fifty and sixty of them. They're just standing at the gate. They haven't entered onto the grounds yet."

All of a sudden, Harry let out an involuntary scream as he clutched his scar and felt his knees buckle under him. He sank to the floor and swore under his breath at the pain and his own continued vulnerability to Voldemort's power. The other four turned and looked at Harry with varying expressions of shock, sympathy and dismay. Cassie moved toward Harry but checked herself as she saw Ginny, who had been standing next to him, kneel down and speak quietly to him. After a moment or so, Harry stood up resolutely. His scar was still causing almost blinding pain, but he steeled himself against it, hardening himself to endure it for a while. He had certainly felt it enough times. Perhaps it was because he had not felt it too much recently that he had reacted so powerfully to the pain today. He chided himself for having earlier wondered if perhaps the castle had already been taken over by Voldemort. Obviously, he told himself, he would have known if Voldemort had been there by the pain in his scar.

Hermione was again looking out the window and confirmed what Harry already knew. "He's arrived, Harry. Now they're getting ready to come onto the grounds."

Cassie turned toward the window and walked tentatively over. "Hermione, may I see those binoculars please? I'd like to see this Voldemort guy."

"Sure." Hermione helped Cassie adjust the Omnioculars and Cassie looked out the window at the group entering the Hogwarts gate. She turned the Omnioculars on Voldemort and let out a cry of horror, dropping them to the ground and stumbling back as if she had been physically pushed by an invisible force.

"That is the most evil man I have ever seen! I can feel his evil from here."

The others looked at Cassie for a moment in shock as she struggled to regain her composure. At the same time, Harry was also struggling to get back his strength. He knew he had to have everything he could muster from within himself. Hermione was again looking out the window and reporting what she saw.

"They're coming in through the gates!"

"Yeah, I know," Harry said grimly as he rubbed his scar and reached for his broom.

"They're walking up the lane! Where are our people? Oh, here they are!" Hermione was looking almost straight down and to the side. "It looks like about twenty of the Order and teachers they're walking down the lane and now they're spreading out in a line across the lane. Ron, Ginny, I see your mum and dad with them, and Bill too. Harry, Lupin's there, and McGonagal and Flitwick. The DA and a couple of teachers are still up by the steps. They're also in a line across the entrance." She then looked out toward the gate. "Ooh, Voldemort doesn't look happy. In fact, a few of the Death Eaters are turning around. Well, they didn't get too far. They were stopped by some of the other Death Eaters." She was speaking calmly, which Harry was grateful for. The tension was high in the room already.

"Yeah, I can only imagine that desertion is not an option. Okay, Ron, Ginny, we better get ready."

Hermione sucked in her breath in a shallow gasp. She turned and looked at Harry and then Ron. then hurried to Ron and hugged and kissed him. "Please be careful. Please," she whispered as she again kissed him.

Ginny turned to Harry, pulled him into a hug and kissed him. She went to let go and Harry held on to her for another moment. "Don't do anything crazy out there. Be careful." He gave her another quick kiss and then let go. She blushed with pleasure and then turned to both Ron and Hermione, giving them each big hugs. Harry noticed Cassie standing near him watching the others with a very nervous expression. He reached out and pulled her into a hug. Her expression turned to pleased surprise. "Be careful, Cassie. Just listen to Hermione and stay out of view of the Death Eaters. And . . . thanks for everything." He kissed her on the cheek. She beamed at him and then looked at the other three. She reached out and gave Ron a hug, turned and hugged Hermione and then turned and looked for a moment at Ginny. She smiled shyly and then reached out and



hugged Ginny, saying quietly to her, "Take care of yourself, Ginny. For Harry's sake. He needs you." Ginny nodded.

Hermione hurried back to the window, again taking up her observation position. "Oh, here are some more of our defenders. They must have come out the back of the castle because they're coming up by the side of it, next to the lake. Ginny, I see Fred and George with them." Hermione looked back out over the main field of battle and let out another sound of surprise. "We have about fifteen more of our people coming at fast pace from the Quidditch pitch! They must have been hiding behind the dressing rooms or something. They're Aurors. I see Tonks and Shacklebolt leading them. We have Voldemort and his Death Eaters hemmed in on almost three sides."

The all-too-familiar sounds of shouts and bangs reached the ears of Harry and the others. He looked at Ron and Ginny. "Let's mount up. Then we'll wait until it's time. Hermione, could you open the windows please and then keep telling us what's happening. You're doing great!" The three mounted their brooms and then hovered in Dumbledore's office a few feet off the ground. Cassie stood to the side, her mouth open in shock.

"Wow, they really do fly!" Harry flashed her a grin and then had to concentrate on keeping his broom in check. The Firebolt seemed anxious to get out of the window to freedom.

Hermione let out a cry of concern. "Oh no! A number of Death Eaters turned toward the Aurors and they're being pushed back. Oh, it looks like some of ours have fallen. Shacklebolt's helping one of them back. Ooh, this looks bad. The curses are flying back and forth in waves."

Ron kicked at his broom a little and it nudged forward. Ginny moved forward and backward nervously, pushing her hand off the wall as she struggled to remain in position. At another cry of dismay from Hermione, Ron let out a rather strong swearword and nudged his broom forward even further. "Come on Harry! We've got to get out there and help them!"

"No, it's not time yet!"

"I can't think of a bloody better time than when our side is getting beaten back."

"Hey, I want to go out there, too. It's just not time."

"Wait!" Hermione yelled, cutting off Ron's retort before he could even speak. "I don't bloody believe it! Oops, uh . . . sorry." Hermione blushed in embarrassment at her letting loose with a swearword.

"Ron, you're a bad influence on Hermione." Ginny laughed at her brother. He rolled his eyes as Hermione explained her outburst.

"It's Hagrid and Charlie! They came from the other side of the castle and they have three giants, well one of them is Grawp, but still, and they actually have centaurs with them. I wonder how they got the centaurs to join them?"

Harry grinned at Cassie and Hermione. "I told you there were giants."

Hermione studiously ignored Harry's comment. "Oh, wow! The two biggest giants each picked up a Death Eater and threw them. They must have flown about thirty feet. They're not moving. But the others are. That part of the Death Eaters' line is moving back and Hagrid and Charlie and the others are pushing them. The Aurors are advancing again."

Ron looked at Ginny and then nudged up by Harry again. "Now is it time? Can we go?"

"No, it isn't time yet. I can't explain it. I can just tell it isn't time.

Ron didn't look too happy as he pushed back to his original spot. All three were getting obviously antsy as they shifted side to side and to and fro on their brooms. Hermione's attention was drawn from the battle to the other direction and she let out a cry of delight.

"It's Dumbledore! He's coming from out of the Forbidden Forest. And . . . eww . . . he's riding a thestral. I hate those things, they're so ugly and scary looking. They're coming this way, you'll see them in just a moment. Here they are."

Everyone looked straight ahead out the window. Albus Dumbledore raced past the window riding a thestral and was followed by four other thestrals, two on each side. Cassie had a shocked expression on her face.

"He's flying through the air with no broom or anything. How is he doing that?"

Ron and Harry turned to Cassie as Ron said, "Take our word for it, they're there. They look kind of like horses with wings except they're black and skeletal. They're pretty scary looking."

"But, I don't see anything."

Ginny looked at Cassie with an odd, almost haunted expression. "Be happy you don't. I don't see them either, but after today, I have a feeling I'll be able to. You, um, well, you can't see thestrals unless you've personally seen death. Unless you've seen someone die right in front of you." Cassie gave a horrified gasp and looked at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a mixture of pity and surprise.

Hermione continued to describe what was happening. "Dumbledore's landed right in front of our people and he's dismounted the thestral. I wonder why he brought the other thestrals. Boy, Voldemort looks very upset. He's screaming something and I bet it isn't very nice. " She turned to Harry with a knowing expression. "Harry, it looks like Dumbledore's rallying the troops or something. He turned and raised his arms high and now he's turned back to the Death Eaters."

Harry swallowed hard, nodded and said, "Hermione, you and Cassie head downstairs. It's time." He turned to Ron and Ginny. "Ready?" Both were pale but had their wands out and were wearing determined expressions; they nodded. Harry nodded in acknowledgment.

"Right then. Now!"

Harry leaned forward on his broom and, with his red and gold robes flying, he streaked forward out through the open window, followed closely by Ron and Ginny.

## Chapter 49

### Battle: A Flash of Red and Gold

As Harry and the others swept through Dumbledore's office windows and into the battle, a kaleidoscopic rush of images met his eyes. Nervously standing in a line of defense up by the castle's entrance were the members of the D.A. Harry saw Hermione come running out the front door and thought to himself that the girls must have run all the way down the stairs. To his horror, he saw Cassie running out of the castle right behind Hermione. Knowing her, she had refused to stay in the broom closet. Harry suppressed the panic he felt at the thought of her out in the open. Hermione would just have to watch over her. He had to concentrate on his job and let others do theirs. He swooped over the defensive lines and saw Dumbledore look up at him. The Headmaster smiled and Harry felt some of his nervousness decrease. He had been right. This is what he was supposed to be doing.

He looked out over the lawn of the castle, and noticed that many of the Order members and other defenders were looking up with expressions of dumbfounded disbelief and incredible joy. He heard gasps and shouts of "It's Harry Potter!" "I can't believe Harry's alive!" and, "Harry Potter's alive!"

Harry quickly flew over their heads and approached the line of Death Eaters, behind which Voldemort was standing. It was not possible to see their faces from here and no one was yelling out in joy at seeing him from this side of the battlefield but Harry knew they had seen him and knew that were shocked. His scar throbbed and he knew that Voldemort was extremely angry. Good. Harry looked at the formation of the battlefield. Formed in almost a "V" shape with the gate into the grounds at their back, the Death Eaters had created a formidable line of attack. At the center of the "V" and behind the line was Voldemort with Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix LeStrange acting as aides. As he drew closer to this line, screams and shouts rose up from the Death Eaters. Voldemort's screams were the loudest. "It's Harry Potter! How could this be? I was told he was dead!" Voldemort did not waste time finding out how he was fooled. He pointed his wand at the unfortunate minion who must have told him that Harry was dead three

weeks ago and the man fell over as the green light hit him square in the chest. Well, Harry thought, if Voldemort could just keep killing his own supporters, it would certainly help their cause. He could see Ron and Ginny out of the corners of his eyes if he turned his head and felt better. They had all made it this far. Harry pointed his broom downward and swept closer to the invaders. Apparently, they had recovered from their shock because wands pointed upward and flashes of yellow, red, and purple light shot up toward the three of them. Harry and the two Weasleys turned, rolled, and zig-zagged to avoid the shower of curses aimed in their direction. Harry tried to pretend these were just vicious Bludgers at a Quidditch game and let himself react to them without thinking too much about it.

Harry turned to make another sweep over the Death Eaters and saw Hagrid. Of course, it was hard to miss him. Hagrid was looking up at him and wiping tears from his eyes. "Pay attention to the enemy, Hagrid," Harry muttered. He was close enough now to the line of giants and centaurs that he could tell what their plan was. There were pushing forward against a slowly retreating line of Death Eaters. The giants, who were very resistant to magic as Harry knew, were acting like the constant stream of curses hitting them were no more annoying than biting gnats and continued pushing toward the line of masked wizards. Harry noticed at least two centaurs down and a couple of others trying to help them. As he turned once again to make yet another loop over the Death Eaters he saw members of the D.A. pointing at him and waving. He waved back quickly and checked behind him. Yeah. Ron and Ginny were still there. It was time to get down to business.

Both Ron and Ginny looked scared but determined, speeding up to get close enough to Harry that they could yell at him. "I don't think they were glad to see us!"

"Let's get 'em!" Ginny yelled.. Harry smiled and nodded, trying not to think of his own pounding heart and sweaty hands. As they swept over the front line, Harry noticed they were pressing forward despite the hailstorm of curses, screams, flashes of yellow, red, purple and green light. As he had anticipated, he heard the unmistakable screams of intense pain caused by the Cruciatus curse. To his dismay, he was close enough that he could see several of the

defenders down on the ground and one or two others trying to help them. Harry again heard shouts of "Harry Potter!" mingled with a couple of frantic calls of "Be careful, Ginny," and "Be careful, Ron." Harry straightened his shoulders and gripped his broom tighter.

He approached Voldemort who was still behind the line of the Death Eaters and he yelled to Ron and Ginny, "Watch my back! I'm aiming for Voldemort!" He had no sooner said that, then he saw a ball of fire shooting up at him and had to do a roll to avoid being hit. "It's just a big Bludger" he thought. He desperately wished that the Weasley twins were near with their bats. He would feel a lot better. Harry gripped his wand tighter in his left hand. He didn't plan on using it in the next few minutes but he felt better knowing he had it. Harry concentrated hard and shot a similar fire ball back at Voldemort, who easily stepped out of the way. It had been too slow. Speed was going to be very important if he hoped to catch Voldemort by surprise. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed three Death Eaters firing curses at him with their wands. He was about to go into a roll to avoid them when Ginny sent a Protego spell that intercepted the colored streams of light and deflected them away from him. At the same moment, Ron fired a stunning spell. Normally, the Death Eaters could have easily deflected the Stupify curse, but they were watching Harry and all three fell to the ground unconscious. Harry knew they wouldn't stay down long. Someone was bound to mutter the counter curse quickly. But, still . . . .

Harry narrowed his focus onto Voldemort. He had to do what he came here to do and kill Voldemort. He just hoped that the plans he had developed in the safety of the Hogwarts' classrooms would translate favorably onto the actual battlefield. Suddenly, Voldemort's voice rang out over the chaos of the field. Harry thought maybe he was the only one who heard him, but from Ron and Ginny's reaction as well as the reactions from the Death Eaters, Harry realized that he must be using a Sonorus charm so that everyone could hear him as he taunted Harry. Well, two could play that game. Harry pointed his own wand at his throat and muttered the charm. But he waited to speak until he heard what Voldemort wanted to tell him first.

"So the halfblood is back and ready to watch again as others die to save his worthless skin. How many times is this, Harry Potter?

Three? Four? How many must die this time?" Harry concentrated on his training in Occlumency and he cleared his mind of the guilt that suddenly flashed through it, focusing instead on calming thoughts. He knew Voldemort was trying to make him angry -- that way Harry would lose his concentration. He had to keep calm, ignoring the twisted truths Voldemort would be screaming at him for the next few minutes. When he felt in control, he answered Voldemort, his own magically magnified voice pouring over the fighting crowd beneath him.

"You know that I'm a pureblood, Tom. It's you that is the halfblood. And everyone knows it. Riddle is a Muggle name." Harry watched with intense satisfaction as Voldemort reacted. Up until that moment, he had never let the current Lord Voldemort know that he knew his actual identity. He smiled as the ugly face twisted in obvious shock. "Tom Riddle! You killed your Muggle father to try to erase . . . ." The shock receded and Voldemort sent two quick bursts of energy up at Harry. He wasn't sure what they would have done if they hit him. He didn't want to find out. He maneuvered quickly to avoid them before he swept out again to come in for another pass.

When he turned to face Voldemort again, he first saw the Death Eaters backing away from him quickly before he registered the reason why. Instead of the tall, almost skeletal wizard who had been standing there a moment before, a gigantic dragon was spreading its black wings and turning its golden eyes to Harry. Harry slowed his broom down and climbed. He had to be up much higher now. He glanced quickly behind him to see Ginny and Ron following his lead. "I can do this myself, you two. You go help the rest of the lines. If there are three of us, it just makes a bigger target!" Ron opened his mouth to argue but Ginny said something Harry couldn't hear and the two of them reversed. A moment later they were out of sight and Harry tried to ignore the sudden plummeting of his stomach. He was almost three years older now but it didn't matter. He still didn't want to face this dragon. He glanced around at the rest of the battlefield. The wizard/dragon had moved and stepped on one of his forces who had not moved fast enough out of his way. The cloaked figure was not moving. That was when Harry suddenly understood Dumbledore's rationale at bringing the five thestrals onto the field. The skeletal creatures fed on blood and raw meat and as he watched, two of the



black animals approached the fallen man, nosing him, wondering if he was going to make a tasty meal. The man regained consciousness at the push of their wet noses against his face and started screaming. Two of the other Death Eaters left their position to help him, trying to shoot various curses at the two magical creatures, but they, like the giants, were unimpressed. Harry smiled to himself. Good thinking, Dumbledore. He looked around again to make certain of what to do next and saw Charlie Weasley heading toward the dragon. He was coming to help, thinking that he could assist Harry as his job was training dragons. But Harry needed to do this himself. "Go away, Charlie. There's nothing you can do here!" Charlie paused and considered. Then he backed up again to where the giants were still picking up Death Eaters and throwing them.

"Sorry, Voldemort! You're not scaring me! Are you disappointed? Almost as disappointed as you were to see me? Are you worried your Death Eaters will start doubting your power. Dragon was a bad choice! I've fought a dragon before. And she was a much more scary dragon than you are! Did your gang never tell you the first task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament? You're a little out of touch, I'd say!" Harry was unsure what exactly he was facing. Was it a dragon that Voldemort had somehow possessed? Did he have a dragon's instincts? Or was it just Voldemort in a different shape? He didn't know and couldn't take time to find out. Well, it had worked once before. He started doing the same thing he had done to that mother dragon, luring this one up from the ground by flying just out of reach of claws, tail, and fiery breath. As he had hoped, the dragon reluctantly rose from the ground to try to catch the annoying pesky Harry and Harry swept quickly down to its soft underbelly, shooting a steady stream of his most powerful pain curses. The dragon howled in agony and a moment later, Voldemort stood again in the center of a diminishing force of dark wizards. Harry pumped his fist in the air and yelled in triumph! His scar throbbed mightily in response. Ah, Tom was a little annoyed. He had been made to look a fool.

Before Voldemort could transfigure again, Harry sent a quick spell down and a griffin appeared next to Voldemort. Harry immediately followed up with a spell creating an iron cage around both of them. This was not going to kill the wizard, Harry knew, but it would keep him occupied for a few minutes. Voldemort quickly recovered his

composure and flicked his wand and the cage disappeared. However, by that time, the griffin had pounced, claws bared, and Harry could see the sudden slash of scarlet on Voldemort's neck even from his height. "That had to hurt, Tom!" Voldemort jumped backward, trying to get enough distance between himself and the lion/eagle to allow him to wave his wand at it and get rid of it. But every movement was met by the approaching griffin and Harry watched, smiling to himself. This was better than he had even hoped. Harry took advantage of Voldemort's distraction and flew overhead, sending a fireball straight down on Voldemort's head. It was deflected and he turned to pass back over. He had to dodge several more curses aimed at him, taking him out away from the center of action and over Hagrid, Charlie and their forces. He watched for a brief second as the centaurs loaded their bows with arrows and Hagrid took careful aim with his crossbow. Together, they released a hail of arrows into the teeming mass of dark-cloaked wizards, and Harry laughed as a couple of them struck targets. Wizards weren't used to having to fight such primitive weapons. But they still hurt like hell, he imagined.

Harry could see that Hagrid, Charlie, and their friends along with the Aurors were doing well on the flank of the Death Eaters and were pushing them back. He looked for Ginny and Ron and saw both of them turned on their brooms shielding themselves from curses flying thick and fast at them from the ground. He looked down and saw a wizard he was positive was Malfoy taking aim at Ginny. Harry immediately stunned him and Ginny flashed him a grateful smile as Malfoy collapsed to the ground. Harry flew over Voldemort again sending down several quick fireballs on and around him. Voldemort was still fighting the griffin but managed to repel them anyway. Obviously, thought Harry, I'm going to have to do something else.

Harry made a wide circle over the defending front line as he lined himself up again for another pass. Harry could see a couple of defenders who had been wounded and had been taken back near the D.A. He could see Madame Pomfrey, Hermione and . . . he did a double-take. Sure enough, there was Cassie kneeling by one of the wounded wizards helping give him a potion. He couldn't believe his eyes, but didn't have any more time to think about it.

As he circled over the lake, Harry noticed a handful of Death Eaters trying to outflank the defenders and begin firing curses at the left flank of the D.A. line of defense and at the wounded defenders and their helpers. With his voice still amplified, Harry yelled, "Look out on your left flank." He glanced back and felt his stomach turn as he saw several flashes of red light and saw a few of the students get hit and crumple to the ground and the little group of helpers fall flat on the ground dodging several curses. He heard the teachers who had been with the D.A. start yelling to not panic and hold their ground as they ran to that flank. A number of students on that flank of the line had begun to cast spells and were attempting to shield themselves, producing an array of sounds, flashing beams of light and smoke. Hermione jumped up and took a defensive stance protecting Madame Pomfrey, Cassie, and the wizards. Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Cho Chang, and Seamus Finnigan joined her and began casting spells and curses in the direction of the attackers who, after a moment or so began to retreat as they were also being hit from the side by some of the defenders in the front line. Fred and George, who were on the left flank of the defending front line, were focusing their attention on the group of Death Eaters. As they fought their way past the line, the twins combined their wands and conjured an enormous lion that charged the Death Eaters with a loud roar. The Death eaters lost all pretense of trying to fight their way back and broke and ran toward the safety of their line. As they did so, the twins sent several stunning blasts, toppling three of the enemy. As the remaining few Death Eaters reached their line, the huge lion evaporated into a puff of smoke.

Dumbledore, Arthur, and Bill Weasley moved forward to offer support as Harry prepared himself to meet Voldemort one more time. Voldemort had finally banished the griffin and turned to watch as Harry approached. Again, his voice rang out, drowning out the other noises on the battlefield. "Did you really think that pitiful attempt at conjuring could defeat me? I am the greatest wizard to ever . . ."

"Yeah. You keep saying that," Harry taunted, his magnified voice equal in strength to that of Voldemort. "Personally, I don't believe it, Tom. Never seen any proof of it." Harry laughed, forcing himself to sound demeaning. His scar was throbbing and he was having a hard time seeing straight. He shook his head and concentrated on forcing

Voldemort's emotions out of his mind. It didn't work too well but at least it gave him a little room to breathe. Suddenly, in front of his eyes, Voldemort transformed into a giant snake. It was bigger than the dragon had been and it was curled up and ready to strike. Harry's eyes widened. He thought that this snake was even bigger than the basilisk he had fought in the Chamber of Secrets. But rather than the deadly golden eyes of that monster, the eyes on this serpent were simply a deep Slytherin-green and Harry met them squarely. The snake began to sway hypnotically and Harry could hear quiet hissing as he attempted to lull Harry closer so that he could strike.

He focused hard and, yes, he understood what the snake was saying. "Come to me, boy, all your troubles will be over. All the loneliness . . . all the pain." Despite himself, Harry found himself following the movements of the giant head, feeling himself getting sleepy. "Yes, that's right. Come to me, boy." The snake was curling, preparing to strike, even as he kept up the lulling words. Suddenly, Harry shook his head and pulled his gaze away from the snake's.

He answered the snake. "I don't think so, Voldemort! Don't want to make things too easy for you!" Harry heard the hissing coming out of his mouth as he answered the snake in its own language. As the snake started in surprise at hearing parseltongue from the boy, Hagrid took careful aim and shot his huge arrow through the snake's tensile body. Instantly, the snake was gone and Voldemort was standing in place, with the huge arrow protruding from his left shoulder. Harry knew better than to feel too confident. A simple healing spell and Voldemort would be as good as new. Well, maybe "good" was a bad way to put it. . "What? Did you forget I speak parseltongue, Tom? Again, your ignorance about your enemy constantly amazes me. And it will be your downfall . . . today!"

Voldemort spoke to Malfoy and LeStrange, both of whom were firing at Harry. Their spells were being blocked by Ron and Ginny and Harry concentrated on Voldemort, not wanting to let him out of his sight. This entire time, they had been slowly backing toward the gates of the school and Harry knew that once Voldemort had passed through them, he would disapparate and it would all be over. Harry used his wand and conjured a wall of fire to try and keep them from getting there too easily. On seeing Voldemort and the Death Eaters

moving toward the gate, Hagrid, Charlie, the giants and the centaurs moved around the line of Aurors toward the gate with the plan of cutting them off.

Suddenly, Harry caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a student - Neville! -- heading toward the line of Death Eaters. In a flash of sudden understanding, Harry knew what Neville was there to do. Bellatrix LeStrange was still alive, something that would change in the next few minutes if Neville could do anything about it. He looked terribly exposed out there by himself, between the lines of Hagrid and the Order members. He was trying to look inconspicuous, but to Harry he stood out like a sore thumb.

Harry heard Ron swear and roll as a green light missed him by inches and headed straight for him. He heard Ginny scream and she too rolled in order to miss a curse. Harry saw a fireball heading straight toward him and turned his broom to present the smallest possible target for the weapon. The tail of his broom caught the outer edge of the fire and deflected the curse downward. Harry gasped in anguish as the curse caught Charlie Weasley on the side and he saw him collapse. Harry wanted to streak down there and help Hagrid get Charlie up to Madam Pomfrey but he knew that was not his job. He had to concentrate on Voldemort. He worked hard to push the feelings of guilt aside. It had been an accident. He couldn't let his feelings overwhelm him or Voldemort would have an advantage.

As he approached the now crumbling line of Death Eaters, Harry saw Voldemort take on the image of Peter Pettigrew. He called out to Harry in Peter's quivering, sniveling voice, "Harry, Harry, I'm sorry I betrayed your parents to the Dark Lord, but it had to be done. I'm sorry they had to die and leave you all alone." Harry fought back a surge of pain and anger and instead laughed. He hoped it didn't sound as forced to everyone else as it did in his own ears.

"Oh that's a good one, Voldemort. Do you really think that the sniveling little rat is going to scare me? You obviously have underestimated me once again! Hey, Peter. How do you like Voldemort making fun of you in front of everyone? He even has your whining down perfectly." Pettigrew had stopped in his flight out of the Hogwarts grounds, turned, and was staring at Voldemort in a mix of

astonished dismay and revulsion. Harry continued on. "You know, Voldemort. You make a pretty good Peter Pettigrew. In fact, the two of you are a lot alike. You and Wormtail are both spineless little wimps with no backbone."

Voldemort screamed and cursed in anger and sent a fireball at Harry who turned on his broom again and batted the fireball back down to the ground with the tail of his broom. Harry flew away quickly to come back and try for another pass. Neville was still standing there, having now been integrated into the line of Order members, but he was steadily approaching the little knot of wizards where Bellatrix was standing, unaware as of yet of Neville's presence. As some of the end twigs of the broom smoked and smoldered again, Harry glanced over at Ginny and Ron who were both exchanging wand fire with various Death Eaters quickly retreating toward the gate. Both of them suddenly performed a quick spell, catching and binding with cords two Death Eaters who had made a break toward the gate.

Harry knew they had to stop the Death Eaters from exiting the grounds where they would be able to disappear. A number of dead and wounded attackers remained behind on the field. He headed toward Voldemort one more time, who was moving as quickly as possible toward the gate. He saw in the distance at least fifteen wizards and witches running from the direction of Hogsmeade to cut off the escape route of the attackers. Harry knew they had to hold them long enough for the others to arrive. He sent a fireball at Voldemort and Hagrid and the centaurs followed it with a storm of arrows. Voldemort and the others flashed their wands at the fireball, but were unable to stop all of the arrows. One of the spears hit Belatrix LeStrange in the arm, ripping flesh and fabric and causing a large gash. She screamed in pain and then sent the Cruciatus curse at Harry, who did rolls in mid-air to miss the curse. Ginny sent a stunning curse at LeStrange which knocked her to the ground. Neville apparently saw that as his opening and started running toward her. Suddenly, Dumbledore raised his arm, and Neville fell to the ground, bound securely in ropes identical to the ones that bound the Death Eaters.

Harry turned his head a little and noticed movement up on the hill by the D.A. line of defense. Hermione, Luna, Cho, and the others were

standing in a semi-circle in front of the castle, guarding the wounded who were laying there waiting to be seen by Madam Pomfrey. Harry then turned his attention back to Voldemort. He needed to stop him now or he would be outside the gates in mere moments. Harry was getting ready to send another fireball when he stopped in mid curse and stared in horror at Voldemort. He had once again changed - into Sirius Black. "Harry," the dark wizard said in Sirius's voice, "Why didn't you help me? Why did you kill me? Why did you let me die? I trusted you, Harry!" Harry's stomach turned and he couldn't bring himself to cast the curse. His concentration drained from him and he halted in mid-air. A second later, Harry's attention was brought sharply back into focus by Voldemort's evil, triumphant laugh as he stepped through the Hogwarts' gates and sent an extra large fireball at Harry. Harry turned his broom again but was too late this time as the fireball streaked by, sending a shot of hot, excruciating pain from his right shoulder through his body. He tumbled in the air end over end and strained to stay on his broom.

Harry used his left hand to guide the broom and turned back toward Voldemort. As he did so, he saw out of the corner of his eye Dumbledore and several other of the defenders in front of the advance line. They were rushing forward as quickly as possible to try to stop Voldemort's escape. Standing around Voldemort were McNair, Bellatrix LeStrange, and Lucius Malfoy, both of whom had recovered from being stunned. As if in slow motion, Harry saw Malfoy point his wand at Dumbledore and scream, "Avada Kedavra!" A stream of green light flashed from the end of his wand toward Dumbledore. Harry watched in paralyzed shock as the flash of green light raced toward its intended victim. At the last moment, Harry saw a small red and gold figure fly in front of Dumbledore, taking the full brunt of the killing curse. The figure fell dead to the ground and Dumbledore looked down in solemnity at the red and gold crumpled form. Lupin, Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody uttered exclamations of anger and outrage and all hit Malfoy with curses. The blonde wizard flew ten feet from where he had been standing and landed in a heap. McNair and LeStrange grabbed him, dragging him through the gate and all three of them disappeared.

Harry saw Ron fly over the field and his mind raced in horror. No! Oh, God, no! "Ginny!" He heard his still-amplified voice screaming. He

turned toward Voldemort and screamed, "Burn in hell, Riddle!" And with his aching arm, Harry raised his wand and, even though he knew how dangerous it was to use his wand against its twin, he pointed it and screamed "Avada Kedavra!" A strong bright stream of green light raced toward Voldemort and hit the very spot he had been standing only a split second before. Voldemort had disappeared.



## Chapter 50

### Aftermath

Harry hovered in mid-air, staring numbly at the spot where Voldemort had disappeared only a few moments before. He had not looked back down where Dumbledore stood and others had gathered. He didn't move. He couldn't bring himself to turn. He just sat there on his broom trying to block out the people and sounds around him. He could not, he would not believe it was really Ginny he had seen out of the corner of his eye flash in front of Dumbledore and fall dead. But who else could it be? Who else was so small and dressed in red and gold?

Harry vaguely registered someone calling his name but was so intent on what had just happened that he took little notice. His fog of despair was abruptly lifted when he heard and felt another broom sail up next to him and heard, "Harry! Harry! It's Ginny. I'm okay. Come on Harry. Let's land."

Ginny. Harry turned instantly and looked into her brown eyes. "Harry, that wasn't me. It's okay, I'm all right." With that, she leaned over and hugged Harry, tightly, balancing carefully on her broom. He felt hot tears streaming down his own face and tried to wipe them away. That was the last thing he wanted people to see, him crying. Ginny grinned at him and helped wipe his face. "Come on. The battle's over. Everyone wants to see you!"

Ron came gliding up with a troubled expression. "Are you okay, mate?"

Ginny spoke for Harry, who was feeling like a very big idiot. "He thought it was me."

"You? He thought what was you?"

Harry nodded and then pointed his wand at his throat, "Quietus. All right, now I can talk."

Harry explained why he had thought it was Ginny as they slowly began their descent toward Dumbledore, who was in the same place as he was before, looking out over the grounds of Hogwarts. Harry thought he looked much older than the last time he had seen him. "All I saw out of the corner of my eye was someone dressed in red and gold being hit by the death curse. Then I saw you, Ron, and realized that only left Ginny. I thought she was dead."

"Oh, it was Fawkes, Harry. Dumbledore's phoenix. Flew right in front and took the whole blast. Just like he did . . . last year, remember?"

Harry felt his face go red with embarrassment. He felt suddenly very silly. Fawkes, of course! He was also red and gold and it made a lot more sense. He should have thought of that himself. As they flew wearily over the lawns toward the castle, Harry looked around at the aftermath of the battle. He had been so focused on what Voldemort was doing, that he had missed a lot of action, apparently. There was a thick cloud of dust and smoke hanging low over the people on the ground, making it difficult for Harry to see very clearly. But he could see a lot of people lying on the ground, most tied up with the masks they had worn shoved up so they could be identified. Death Eaters. There was a centaur or two lying deathly still on the grass, and Harry felt a pang of regret at their loss. In the distance, he could see some defenders lying on the ground also, but most seemed to be getting help from Madam Pomfrey. The giants were still stalking around and Hagrid was trying to get them to sit in one place so they wouldn't hurt anyone accidentally. Harry didn't see Charlie right away, he hoped his burn had been minor. Harry felt terribly guilty at having caused him any pain at all. "Hey, Harry. Come on. Let's land. There are a lot of people who want to talk to you." The three of them landed next to Dumbledore who was holding a newly-reborn Fawkes. Dumbledore looked searchingly into Harry's eyes and then smiled.

"Oh, Harry. It's so good to have you back. We missed you."

"But I blew it. Despite all the planning everyone did, he still . . . I failed. Again." Harry felt like there was never an end in sight to his task. He suddenly felt as old and tired as Dumbledore. Dumbledore looked like he was about to answer Harry when suddenly they found themselves surrounded by a huge crowd of people, all yelling in excitement. And

then there was a rush of people grabbing and hugging Harry, Ginny, and Ron. Harry felt himself being hugged and touched by many different sets of arms. He recognized everybody but was unsure what to say to them. They all had a million questions and Harry didn't even know where to start answering them. Finally, Molly Weasley was there and she hugged Ginny and Ron tightly, chastising them quickly for being rash enough to fly out and face the Death Eaters, but then she enveloped Harry in her arms and Harry gave up trying to speak at all. After a moment though, when she finally loosened her grip on him, he asked her a question. "How's Charlie doing?"

A look of utter confusion crossed Mrs. Weasley's face, then she went pale. "Charlie? What about Charlie?"

Oh, no. Harry had assumed that the Weasleys knew Charlie had been hurt. Now he had to tell them. And it was his fault. "Uh, a big fireball hit him and he fell down. Hagrid was going to help him, I think. I'm . . . ." but he couldn't finish the sentence. She had turned toward where Charlie had been at the beginning of the battle. "I think he was over there, Mrs. Weasley." Harry pointed her gently in the direction that he had last seen Charlie and she took off, fighting her way with surprising strength through the still-milling crowd. Arthur followed immediately, unsure of the problem, but knowing that his wife was greatly upset. The other Weasley family members followed in their wake, also unsure of what the problem was, but anxious to find out. Harry felt even worse. He wanted to follow them, also but he was unsure whether he would be welcome, especially if they found out that he had caused Charlie to be hurt, even though it had been an accident. While he was trying to decide, the crowd closed in around him again and he couldn't get out at all.

Dumbledore spoke up then, his voice quieting the madding crowd. "I know that everyone has questions for Harry, but now is not the time for lengthy explanations. Suffice it to say that he has been in hiding, hoping to surprise Voldemort enough that we could defeat him. He will be able to answer your questions in more detail later. Right now, we have work to do. There are wounded that need tending to and there are things that must be done." The crowd dispersed and Harry stood there by Dumbledore for a second.

"I guess I better go find out how . . ."

"Yes. I am sure they are anxious for you to join them." Harry wasn't sure about that, but he wanted to find out how Charlie was, so he started that direction. Then, he saw Neville running toward Dumbledore. He stopped Harry with a hand on his arm.

"Harry! I can't believe it! I thought you were a ghost at first, but then . . . Well, it's just unbelievable that you're here!"

"Yeah. I'll tell you all about it later. Look, I saw what happened, um, earlier, with the ropes and . . ."

Neville's face turned bright red. "Yeah. I was hoping no one saw me." Dumbledore stepped to the two of them. "Oh, hello, Professor. Um, thanks for . . . well, thanks." Harry looked quizzically at Neville. He didn't think that he would be thanking Dumbledore for trussing him up like that.

"You are too important to this cause to lose, Mr. Longbottom. I think you could have hurt Bellatrix LeStrange, but you certainly would have been killed by that stream of curses that was being aimed at your back at that moment."

"Yes, Professor. I saw them pass right over my head a split second after I hit the ground." Dumbledore nodded.

"I'm glad you're not angry. You are a good, strong fighter. We need you." He smiled kindly down at Neville and Harry was pleased that Dumbledore had noticed the vast improvement Neville had made in his magical skills in the past year. Having his own wand helped a lot, some increased confidence also had made a difference. Neville could now really hold his own in their practice dueling sessions and Harry was always glad to fight beside him on the few occasions he had done so. Neville hurried off on some other errand and Harry resolutely made his way toward the group huddled around Charlie near the Hogwarts' gate.

It was a subdued gathering. Charlie was laying there unconscious, his face contorted in pain, even though he couldn't feel it. His robes

were burned and the skin Harry could see on his neck and arm was blistered and reddened. Madam Pomfrey had just arrived a moment before Harry and was administering a potion to Charlie. "He should recover nicely. It will take time, though. This potion will keep him unconscious so that he won't be in pain tonight." She was, as always, efficient, and mere moments later, Charlie was on a stretcher which was being carried up to the castle by some of the Order members who were helping transport the wounded, closely followed by Molly and Arthur. Hagrid, seeing Harry for the first time, engulfed him in a hug so big that Harry really wondered if the gameskeeper was trying to suffocate him.

"I jus' can' believe it, 'Arry! You're alive!"

"Yeah, Hagrid I'll have to tell you about it later, okay. How's Charlie?"

"Oh." Hagrid's face fell. "I think he's okay. After that spell 'it 'im, an' all, well, uh, I had Grawp pick him up and move him over here. 'E moved and stuff, so I spect he'll be all right. Dumbledore wouldn' let nuttin' 'appen to 'im. 'E likes Charlie. An' anyways, Charlie's used to fire. 'E trains dragons, after all." Harry thought that was probably a fair statement. Charlie was used to being burned. Of course, the fire could have been an enchanted flame of some sort. He really hoped that Madam Pomfrey could sort it out. "' Course, one of You-Know-Who's people tried to finish 'im off a few minutes after 'e fell down, 'e started to use an Unforgivable, but I . . . well, I didn't let 'im, did I? I couldn't let 'em kill a man when he's down." Harry looked where Hagrid was indicating and he could feel his eyes grow wide.

"Oh. Yes. Well. Um, good job, Hagrid. I'm sure Charlie appreciates it." There was a Death Eater, wand arm still raised except that he had fallen backward so the arm was actually pointing up at the sky like he was a strange doll. He looked amazingly peaceful, somehow, robes neat and mask still in place. There was only one strange thing about him. He had a very large arrow right through the center of his chest. Harry imagined, having seen Hagrid's crossbow shoot those arrows several hundred feet, that since it only went about 20 feet before stopping the man's curse mid-word, that it went all the way through and probably pinned him to the turf below. He really didn't want to find out.

"Well," Ron said. His face was pale and his freckles were more obvious than usual. "I guess we should, uh, . . ." He lost his train of thought half way through the sentence and he stopped talking, as if it was just too much effort. Ginny's face was also pale and pinched. Harry grabbed them both and steered them toward Dumbledore with the intention of having him tell them what to do. Ron seemed to come back to himself as they saw Dumbledore approaching them and he started looking around, as if searching for someone. At first, Harry wasn't sure what he was doing, but then he realized the Ron was looking for Hermione. Of course. Hermione and Cassie came up to Dumbledore at the same time that Ron, Ginny, and Harry did.

Hermione immediately grabbed Ron and squeezed him, hard. Harry tuned them out, only vaguely hearing the word "Charlie" and Hermione muttering something about how proud she was of the three of them. But he was paying attention to Cassie. She looked, well, shell-shocked was probably a good word for it. Her hair, which had been loose around her face when he had last seen her in the office, was pulled back into some sort of ponytail. Her face was dirty, smeared with soot and dirt and what he was quite sure was blood. Her robes were rumpled and dirty and if they were not black, Harry was pretty sure he would see blood on them, too. But it was her eyes that caught and held Harry's attention. They were haunted, now. Not the same defiant flashing blue that they had been earlier. They had seen too much for that. Maybe his eyes looked the same. He'd have to look in a mirror and see. He opened his arms and she fell into them, sobbing.

"I can't believe it. I just can't. It was horrible, and you were wonderful, and I can't believe you survived it. I thought you were . . ." Harry patted her back awkwardly, unsure of what to do. Ginny was talking to some friends who had come up to her as Cassie was talking, and Harry relaxed a little. After a few moments, Cassie backed up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sob all over you. And now you're all dirty." She brushed ineffectually at his robes where her face had left smear marks on the scarlet cloth.

"Oh, don't worry about that. Look." He turned so she could look at his right side and she gasped in shock. The robes were torn and burned where he had been hit right at the end. His arm had bled a little, too. "Don't worry, Cassie. I've been hurt a lot worse than this before. Madam Pomfrey will fix me right up." She looked a little more appeased.

"She gave me some sort of painkiller potion thing to give to people who were hurt."

"Yeah, I recognized it. You looked like you were being pretty helpful."

"I was trying. I . . . It was horrible. So many people screaming and . . ."

"Yeah, that's their favorite trick. Crucio."

"What?"

"Oh, the Cruciatus curse. It just . . . makes you hurt. Bad."

"You mean that's all it does? It just makes someone scream like that - from pain?"

"Um, yes. Useful when you're a bad guy, huh?" Cassie shuddered in response and Harry wished he hadn't brought it up. He wanted to change the subject and glancing around saw Dumbledore standing nearby, directing some of the Order members as they dealt with the prisoners and the dead and wounded. "Come on, Cassie. I want to introduce you to Dumbledore."

"Okay. He was really amazing. When I saw him, he was like . . . so powerful."

"That pretty much sums him up, all right." They both approached the headmaster, Harry tugging gently on her arm as she seemed rather hesitant. "You'll love him, don't worry." And then they were there and Dumbledore turned his light blue eyes on the two of them. Harry started the introductions, "Headmaster, I'd like to . . ."

"You must be Cassie. I'm so pleased to meet you." He stuck his hand out and enfolded her much smaller hands in his. She looked as shocked as Harry felt.

"Who told you about her?" Harry imagined that either Ron, Ginny, or Hermione had mentioned Cassie while Harry was busy doing something else.

"Do you mean which of your friends, Harry? None of them, I can assure you."

"Oh, I know who it was. It was that Gottshawks fellow from the Museum, then."

"Well," Dumbledore turned his gaze to Harry, "In a way, you're right. He told me her name. But I already knew of her existence."

"What? How could you?" Harry had been so careful never to give any sort of hint to Dumbledore. "It was that stupid doorbell, wasn't it?"

"No, Harry. It was you."

"Me?"

"Yes, by what you didn't say. Your letters changed. You stopped begging to come back to Hogwarts. And I knew. Now, young lady," he turned his attention back to Cassie with a smile, "I am so sorry that you had to meet us today. Truly this is not one of our better times." His face grew grave and Harry saw the exhaustion settle again over his features. "Things weren't always like this, you know." Cassie was nodding. After a moment, Dumbledore let go of her hands. "I need to make a short speech, I'm afraid." He clapped and his voice rang out over the quiet people still standing on the lawns. Harry was amazed. He hadn't used a charm or a wand or anything. Of course, he was Dumbledore.

"Please, will everyone who can gather around me for just a few short moments and indulge an old man in his silliness." A few minutes later, there was a fairly sizeable group of students and teachers and others gathered around Dumbledore. "I can tell by the looks on your faces



that there are many who are discouraged at this time, thinking that we once again failed in our mission. And yes, it is true, Voldemort has once again slipped from our grasp. However, please realize that despite that, I count it as a victory. For one thing, we have certainly wounded, killed, and captured a sizeable number of Death Eaters, I believe the current count is 25 dead, 15 wounded, and 12 captured alive and well. That is a total of 52 and that is certainly impressive. It will be a significant blow to him and we hope to get information from those that will be interrogated by the Ministry. But most importantly, we have kept Hogwarts out of Voldemort's hands. That in itself was worth the price we paid today in blood and pain. However, we have accomplished these things with an amazingly light casualty count on our side. The surprise was so complete that we were able to strike quickly and do a great deal of damage. I believe that we have lost four of our own fighters with a count of about 10 seriously wounded. There are, of course, many more who are hurt in various minor degrees. We have lost no students, which I consider nothing short of a miracle. For they fought bravely, with no thought of their own safety. All of us have been through a terrible ordeal today and there may be some of you who wonder how you will close your eyes tonight and sleep. Please, feel free to ask Madam Pomfrey for a potion to help you sleep without nightmares tonight. I am sure she has a sufficient supply. Severus has been making it for a week solid, I believe." Dumbledore looked around at the dead who still lay on the field. "If there are some of you who feel that you would like to help Madam Pomfrey with those who are wounded in the hospital, I am sure she would appreciate it. Especially if you have any training. However, for the rest of you, I want to invite all of you, not just students, to come and eat with us in the Great Hall. The House Elves have prepared a meal that will hopefully be to your satisfaction."

The crowd broke up slowly, almost everyone taking a moment to speak to Dumbledore about one thing or another. They were all exhausted and walked slowly toward the castle. Harry looked around for Ron and Ginny and, spotting them, started toward them with Cassie by his side. However, Dumbledore spoke up. "Harry, please send Cassie up to get some food with your friends. You and I need to speak."

"Oh." Harry tried not to be too nervous as he turned Cassie over to his three friends and all four headed up to eat. He wondered what Dumbledore wanted. He hoped he wasn't going to get yelled at. But when he stood in front of Dumbledore and dared to look up into his eyes, there was no anger there or disappointment. Instead, there were tears. And Harry had to blink to make sure they were not his own.

"Harry. You were brilliant. You did exactly what I wanted you to do."

"But we lost."

"No. We won. Decisively. Yes, it is true that Voldemort slipped through our net once again. The rear guard who were supposed to keep him from leaving out the gate once he was inside the grounds was delayed much longer than it should have been. I am unsure at this point what happened, but it is certainly not something you can blame yourself for. No. You fought brilliantly and bravely and I was, as always, honored to call you my friend." Harry could hardly believe this. He was unsure whether he should believe it. Maybe Dumbledore was just making this up, trying to make him feel better. "Harry, I want to talk to you in the morning about several issues. But for tonight, I just want to make sure that you know that you did everything I wanted and nothing that I didn't." They set up a meeting time in the morning, and Harry started up the long sloping lawn toward the main entrance of the castle. He was surprisingly hungry and although he wasn't sure how much he would actually wind up eating, he decided that he would find his friends and at least try to eat something.

## Chapter 51

### Good to Be Home

The entrance hall of the castle was empty and Harry's footsteps echoed strangely in the quiet as he approached the Great Hall. He was reminded eerily of his dream that he had recounted to Ron and Hermione only that morning although it seemed like it was a year ago. But then he heard the quiet laughter and speaking of numerous students and guests in the hall and he relaxed. He pushed open the door and stepped into the long, candle-lit room.

The tables were full to groaning with a wide assortment of dishes. Harry glanced up out of habit at the enchanted ceiling. It was showing a beautiful sunset and Harry took a deep breath. It was good to be home again. Harry approached the Gryffindor table and saw Ron and Hermione, then Cassie and next to her Ginny. Across from their group were Fred and George Weasley. It appeared Fred and George had appointed themselves the unofficial entertainment for the group as they both had their wands out and were entertaining the Gryffindor table by having two roasted chickens chasing each other up and down the table to the delight of most of the students. Giggling and laughter could be heard up and down the table. Ron, Cassie and Ginny were laughing loudly. Hermione had a look somewhere between amusement and disapproval. As Harry arrived, the twins grinned and guided the two chickens to their respective platters and had them lay back down. "Did'ja want some chicken, Harry?" At that, Ginny looked up at him, smiled and scooted over so he could sit down between her and Cassie.

Harry looked around at the rest of the house tables. No one was sitting at the Slytherin table. That was curious. Maybe they were protesting and eating in their common room - he wasn't going to complain. Dinner would be even more peaceful without them. Then he jumped a little as someone at the Ravenclaw table turned into a canary. Then someone in Hufflepuff followed and everyone at that table laughed loudly. Fred and George laughed, too. Harry shot them a questioning look. "People know what'll happen, but they don't mind." Just then, Neville himself sprouted feathers. Fred and George laughed even louder at this. He had been their original victim so it

was funny that he was willing to do it again. After Neville molted and lost his beak so that he could be understood, he shrugged and looked down the table.

"They taste so good, it's worth it. It only lasts for a few minutes." Cassie smiled shyly down the table at him.

Harry looked down at the table and saw that a plate, goblet, and silverware had appeared in front of him. He looked over Cassie's and Ginny's plates to see what they had been eating. "What do you recommend?"

"Well, I had a sandwich and it was good. I was going to have the chicken but watching them race back and forth sort of . . . ." Harry grinned at Cassie, knowing what she meant. Seeing your food move could certainly make you wonder about eating it.

"They've got shepherd's pie, Harry. You like that, don't you?" Ginny reached over and pulled over one of the platters toward him. He helped himself to a little of that, feeling at the moment like he didn't have much of an appetite. Ron looked up from his conversation with Hermione and shoved a platter full of fried chicken in Harry's direction. Fred grabbed some fried potatoes from his end of the table and pushed them toward Harry. He helped himself to a little of everything and then looked up and down the table for the pumpkin juice. He was terribly thirsty.

"Hey, isn't there pumpkin juice?"

"You'll have to get some from the other end of the table. I think Cassie drank all of ours." Harry's eyes widened and he turned quickly to look at the guilty party. She flushed pink when she felt his eyes on her.

"It was really good, Harry. You were right." He laughed but before he got up to find himself a new pitcher, one appeared on the table next to his goblet. He poured himself a glass and drank it down in one gulp.

"Did you want more?" He pushed the pitcher over to Cassie. She bit her lip.

"I think I've had enough." George spoke up at that.

"I think she had about five glasses."

"Four. Okay, maybe five." Harry laughed again at the look on her face.

"Glad you liked it. Told you it was good."

"They've even got Butterbeer, Harry. It's down at the ends of the tables." Ron held up his bottle and Harry did a double take.

"They've never had that before. What's the deal?"

"Well," Fred answered, smirking, "Now that the adults are eating with you, they decided to give us something a little stronger than juice."

"Ha, ha. I'm sure that's it, Fred."

George spoke up, "Actually, he's right. They've got some Ogden's, too."

"What?!!!" Harry looked down the table and, sure enough, there was a bottle of the firewhiskey not far from George's elbow. "That's certainly a change!" Fred picked up the bottle and splashed a little into his pumpkin juice. Ron tried to grab it from Fred but dropped it instantly.

"Aaah." He shook his hand up and down like it had been burned. "Shocked me, stupid thing."

"It's got an age protection spell on it, you dolt! Did you think the professors would just set bottles of it on the table so you ickle babies can get drunk? Think about it!" George grabbed the bottle and splashed a little into his juice. Harry knew neither of the twins cared much for alcohol and he imagined they were just showing off the fact that they were now considered adults. Ron held out his glass.

"Pour a little into mine while you're at it, would'ja?"

"Ron!" Hermione grabbed his arm and tried to pull it back down. "Don't you dare. I'll tell your mother!" Ginny scowled down the table at her three brothers.

"Don't you two do that! I'll tell mum, too."

"Don't worry, Hermione, Ginny. We know better than to give this drink for grownups to ickle Ronnie-kins. Wouldn't want him to get out of control, right Fred?" George was smirking at Ron, who scowled. "Anyone want to test our new . . ."

"No!" was the unanimous response from the group.

"Oh, come on. It's a good trick." George held out a bag. Harry couldn't see what was in it, but he wasn't about to find out. Cassie looked curious and leaned forward to see into the bag. Harry grabbed her shoulder.

"Don't. You'll regret it. They were the ones who invented the canary cremes. The ones that make you turn into a big yellow bird!"

"Oh." She looked a little more hesitant but George shook the bag closer to her face.

"Come on, Cassie, give 'em a try. They're harmless."

"Cassie, don't do it. Never eat anything they give you. You'll regret it." She shook her head at George.

"I better not."

"Is he your boss? Come on, try it. Nothing will happen, well . . . nothing too bad anyway."

"George, you should know that . . . ." Harry was just about to whisper that she was a Muggle so that they wouldn't insist on trying out some unknown thing on her but just then Bill walked into the hall and everyone turned to him. He was closely followed by someone Harry had been wondering about since the beginning of the battle - Remus Lupin. George tucked the bag into his robes and stood up to greet Bill.

"How's Charlie, Bill?"

"He's doing pretty well. Mum and Dad are ready to go back home. Come on. They can tell you more details."

"Hey, we want to know, too," said Ginny.

"He's really doing well. Pomfrey says he'll be completely better in a day or two. I'm sure he'd like to see you guys tomorrow. He's asleep right now." The twins arose to go with Bill. They said goodbye to everyone.

They each reached over and gave Harry a poke in his arm and told him how good it was to see he was actually alive. Then they turned to Cassie. "It was nice meeting you," Fred said. George chimed in. "Yeah, you need to come by our shop sometime. It's in Diagon Alley, next to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. We'd love to see you again. But leave Harry at home. He obviously has no sense of humour. Here's our card." With that he handed Cassie a large purple and gold embossed business card. Cassie took it and, as soon as she touched it, a voice came from the card screaming. "Ow! That hurts. Let go of me!" Cassie jumped and dropped the card onto the table. The card then said, "Ha, ha. Just kidding. Be sure to visit Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in Diagon Alley."

The twins burst out laughing. "Do you like our new business cards?" Fred asked between guffaws, "We changed them from the ones that made your hand shrivel up. For some reason people didn't seem to find the humour in that." Ron grinned while both Hermione and Bill rolled their eyes. Cassie looked down nervously at the card.

"Will it talk to me again if I pick it up?"

George smiled. "No, it only works once. You're safe now."

Cassie smiled back, picked up the card and the three brothers left the hall waving good-bye. "They are so funny! Those stories they were telling earlier, Harry! About the stuff they did here at school! I've never laughed so hard in my entire life! I think they must have made it

all up, though. No two people could get into that much trouble." She smiled and slipped the card into her pocket. "Not that I'll ever get there, but the card is funny. Do you think it will work if I give it to someone else?" Ginny shrugged but Harry had other things on his mind. He turned his attention to Lupin who had just returned after going up to the head table to speak to Hagrid.

He smiled, rose from the table, and hugged Lupin, who gave him a big smile and hug in return. "How are you, Harry? It's so good to see you! You don't know how upset I was when we thought you were . . ." His voice trailed off and the look of pain on his face told it all.

Harry felt a lump in his throat as he nodded. "I understand and I'm sorry for putting all of you through that. It's just that . . ."

"I know." Lupin interrupted. "Dumbledore explained it to me." Harry nodded. He was aware of Lupin's inquisitive glance at Cassie. Harry turned and saw Cassie staring up at Lupin with wide eyes and then remembered he had told her about Remus Lupin's being a werewolf. He silently berated himself for having told her and hoped she wouldn't show the fear she was obviously feeling. He wouldn't want to embarrass Lupin for anything. He hesitantly introduced her, trusting that she was polite enough to at least act friendly.

"Remus, this is Cassie Robinson. I, uh, met her while I was hiding in London."

Remus smiled at Cassie and held his hand out. She looked intently into his eyes for a moment and then noticeably relaxed, smiled and took his hand. Harry smiled in relief at both of them as they shook hands. Remus smiled at the others sitting there, "Ron, Ginny, Hermione . . . It's good to see you." He put his arm around Harry's shoulders. "I understand you're meeting with Dumbledore in the morning?" Harry nodded. "Great. I'll be there, too. We can talk more then. I'm busy . . . Dumbledore put me in charge of dealing with the prisoners." Harry looked surprised and Lupin gave him kind of a funny look. "Yeah, I don't know why either since it involves the Ministry. I think it's his way of thumbing his nose at their regulations. Trying to do a good job for him. Better run. Nice to meet you, Cassie." He smiled at her and then at everyone else and left the hall.



"He's really nice." Cassie said to Harry as they both sat back down at the table.

"Yeah. He's great." Harry smiled. "It was so good to see him. I missed him a lot." A moment later, the puddings appeared on the table. "Ooh, dessert. I don't know if I'm up to it." Ginny, however, helped herself to some chocolate cake and Ron was digging into the trifle. Cassie sampled a little of the apple tart.

"The food here is really good, Harry. Do you eat like this all the time?"

"Basically, yeah."

"Who cooks it? Is it all magic? How does it get up to the tables? Who washes the dishes after they . . ."

"Hey! Let me answer you before you work yourself into a frenzy!" She threw him a dirty look but let him talk.

"Hogwarts has house elves. They're in charge of the cooking. They work down in the kitchen and cook all the food. It comes up by magic. I imagine the dishes are washed by magic, too, although I'm not sure about that part."

"Elves? There's no such thing as . . . oh, never mind." Harry smirked at her a little as she today had seen giants and centaurs and flying broomsticks and a phoenix and all sorts of other things that yesterday she would have said didn't exist. Then he suddenly yawned, and his exhaustion pressed down on him.

"I think I'll head up to bed. I'm exhausted."

"We'll all go up," Ginny added and Hermione and Ron also stood. "It's been a long couple of days." Cassie remained sitting at the table, fiddling a little with her fork. She looked up a little pleadingly at Harry.

"What am I supposed to do tonight? Can someone take me home?"

Harry grimaced. "I'm sure we can find someone to . . ."

Hermione spoke up quickly. "You can stay here tonight, Cassie. We'll make sure you get home in the morning. Don't worry. But it's late tonight, and I'm sure you're tired."

"I am but I'm not sure that . . . I mean, my mum and dad . . . ."

"They're still out of town, right? Don't worry. Dumbledore'll make sure you get home tomorrow."

"Yeah. You can stay in my dorm. Everyone else is gone so I've got plenty of room." Ginny smiled broadly. "We'll have a great time. And you may even get some sleep." Ginny winked. "Oh, and Hermione, you may as well come join us. It'd be better than hanging out with Lavender and Pavarti, wouldn't it?"

"Gee, you're going to have to really twist my arm, Gin. I'll do that. All I care about right now though is having a really long shower and getting out of these clothes. Cassie's probably just as grimy and tired as I am. We didn't have pyjamas last night or anything so we've been in these since yesterday morning!"

"Well, let's head up. Oh, Cassie . . . do you think you're going to be able to sleep?"

"I can hardly keep my eyes open. I don't think I'll have a problem with it."

"Um, you don't think you'll have nightmares or anything? I mean, we're kind of used to the fighting and all, but . . . ."

"Oh." Cassie suddenly got a somber look on her face and Harry had a wave of guilt pass through him. He had done this to her. Her eyes, which had taken on their previous bright glint as the dinner had progressed, clouded over again. "I think I'll be all right. I wasn't right down in the fighting or anything. I'd rather not take anything that I don't need to."

"Okay, if you're sure," Hermione spoke up. "If you change your mind, just say. We can take you over to the hospital wing anytime."

"Hospital wing? You need a whole wing at the school?" Cassie was shocked. "At my high school, they have one room with two beds and a toilet." The other four laughed. That would never work here.

"Uh, well, yeah. Actually." Hermione flushed a little and Harry almost laughed at her expression. "We have a lot of accidents here. Learning magic can be a little . . . messy." Harry wondered if she would tell Cassie later about her experience being turned into a cat or being petrified but at the moment, Hermione let the subject drop.

"Ugh. I'd rather not know any more, thanks. I think I saw enough magic out there. It's pretty powerful stuff." Harry wanted to protest. So much of what she saw today was much more evil than anything they ever did at school, but then another wave of exhaustion broke over him and he decided that if they didn't go upstairs soon, he'd just fall over and sleep on the floor of the Great Hall. He wanted his own bed.

"Come on. I'm tired. I want to go to bed." The small group started up the stairs and Cassie looked at everything as they passed, not commenting. Her eyes were wide and she kept turning her head, trying to see everything at once. Harry remembered what it was like the first time he went this way and could sympathize with her amazed expression. They climbed and climbed. After the third long set of stairs, Cassie spoke up.

"I think you guys should invest in some lifts or something. This is exhausting!" Hermione and Harry laughed. Ron and Ginny just looked puzzled.

"A lift, Ron, like in the Ministry."

"Oh. Yeah. Those would be handy here. I wonder why we don't use them."

"They'd never work here, Cassie. No electricity. It doesn't interact well with magic. Notice we still use torches and candles. The ones at the Ministry must be specially charmed."

"I thought the candles and things were just for atmosphere. But this explains how you can eat all the heavy food and stay so thin. You wear it all off just going up to bed. I'm going to collapse."

"We're almost there. You can do it." They actually had two more flights of stairs before Harry finally saw the familiar face of the Fat Lady. She looked at him and did a double-take.

"I thought you were dead. But you don't look like a ghost to me."

"I'm not dead. I'm not a ghost either. I'm sure you'll hear the whole story later."

"No doubt. Password, anyone?" The Fat Lady looked at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. She ignored Cassie completely although Harry wondered if that would be the case when a non-Gryffindor girl tried to pass through the portrait hole.

"Oh, yeah." Ron flushed rather red. "I didn't pick this, Harry, believe me. Um, 'Vengeance for Harry.'"

Harry blushed bright red. "That's great. Can we get that changed tomorrow? I refuse to give that as a password. Talk about sappy!"

Hermione sniffed and Harry got the distinct impression that she had been the one to suggest the password. He was surprised she didn't give it in Latin. That sounded like something she would do. He smiled at her. "Now I'm back, it's not necessary, Hermione."

"Obviously. It was set weeks ago." She sniffed again, and Cassie laughed. The Fat Lady looked at her for the first time as she swung open.

"Who is that? She's not a Gryffindor."

"She's my friend. Dumbledore knows she's here." Ginny spoke quickly and then added, "She's only here for one night." Then they all slid through the portrait hole, and Harry looked around the familiar common room for the first time in what felt like years although it had only been a little more than three weeks.

"What's all the black for?" All of the portraits had black bands around them and even the statues had black arm bands. There were black banners and black ribbons around the stair rails.

"Think about it, Harry." Ginny answered him, her tone fairly sarcastic.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. I keep forgetting I was dead. Um, look, do me a favor. If I ever really do die . . . don't do this. It makes me out to be some sort of hero or something. I'm just a kid. A kid with incredibly bad luck." All three of his friends pursed their lips but didn't answer him. Cassie was more outspoken.

"I wouldn't say that, Harry. I saw you today. You are a hero. And really brave, too. So you deserve it." At his look of disgust, she said it again. "You are. Don't sell yourself short." Harry didn't know how to answer this, so he didn't.

"Darn. I bet I've got to go get my trunk from Dumbledore's office. I should have thought of that before now." He wasn't sure he had the energy to deal with this right now. "Maybe . . ."

"Just come on up, Harry. You can borrow my pyjamas or something. Everything else can wait until tomorrow."

"Yeah. He's right. And Cassie, I have a nightgown you can borrow."

"I bet, since you sleep in . . . ." Oops. Cassie's eyes suddenly widened. She shouldn't have started that sentence. She forgot that Ginny hadn't been there during that conversation.

"Since I sleep in what?" Then Ginny's eyes widened and she blushed bright red. "Hermione, I can't believe you told them!"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I just . . . I mean, Harry was wondering where his shirt was and everything . . ." That wasn't quite true. Harry hadn't even noticed it was gone but he was smarter than to say that at this moment. It would just be asking for trouble. Hermione was still stumbling through an explanation. "It just came out, kind of accidentally."

"Oh, I'm not really mad. It's just embarrassing. Do you want it back, Harry?" He shook his head.

"No. I'm sure you look better in it than I do." Ginny blushed and then laughed and soon all five of them were sitting on the couch and chairs, laughing probably more than the situation warranted, their exhaustion making them slightly punch drunk. A few moments later, they had all calmed down enough to say goodnight. Ron and Hermione hugged each other hard and kissed before they split up and each headed up their own staircases. Harry kissed Ginny softly. "Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning." Cassie was staring hard at the fire and Harry imagined that she felt a little self-conscious. He touched her arm. "You've been fantastic today, Cass. I mean it. You've been great." He bent and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Thanks for everything. You really . . . you're just . . . You really saved my life in London. You know that, don't you?"

Cassie nodded and kissed him back. "I'm so glad I got to meet you."

"Well, hey. This isn't goodbye. We'll see each other in the morning, okay?" She nodded again and followed Ginny up the stairs. Harry started up his own staircase. Ron had waited for him up one landing and the two of them climbed up the several flights of steps, entering the familiar dorm room which now said "Sixth Years" on it. Harry looked in and smiled. "It's good to be back, Ron. I sure missed this place."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. Oh, look. The elves were as efficient as ever. Hermione hasn't completely ruined them with her S.P.E.W. nonsense." Harry grinned in response. His trunk was in its accustomed place at the foot of his bed. He was glad he hadn't gone to Dumbledore's office. He would have been sorely disappointed at the wasted trip. All his things were here, all the clothes he had bought in London were folded on his chair. Even the pillowcase was folded on top. His invisibility cloak, Omnioculars, and even his broom, which he had left downstairs, were all in their accustomed places in his trunk. And then Harry saw a familiar sight. Hedwig's cage! It was empty but the door was open. He walked over to it and looked in. There was water there and what looked like some fairly recent

crumbs from her favorite owl treats. Ron noticed where Harry was looking. "She's been living in the owlery but she comes down here periodically for treats and petting. She's missed you. Theoretically, she was supposed to help out the other school owls to earn her keep, but she's refused to carry anything. She just turns up her beak and turns her back."

Harry laughed at the image Ron described. He knew that owls were very strong magical creatures. He wondered if Hedwig had known all along that he was alive. He'd have to ask Dumbledore that sometime. He was distracted at the thought and sat down on his bed but then dragged himself up again. "I really need a shower. I'm filthy!" Ron joined him and they both headed to the bathroom for long hot showers and then Harry got on his comfortable pyjamas and collapsed onto the bed.

Harry had just slid under the covers of his four-poster bed when Ron laughed suddenly. "I do feel bad for you, mate."

"Why?"

"You've got your new girlfriend, your old girlfriend, and one of your best friends all together. They're going to be gossiping about you all night!"

"Do you think so?"

"I know so. They're going to be swapping embarrassing Harry stories all night long. And if they run out, they'll make some up. Ginny and Hermione are bad enough together, add Cassie to the mix and there's no saying what'll happen."

"Oh, great! That thought will really help me sleep, Ron. Thanks." Harry rolled to his side and then onto his back again. His arm hurt too much to lay on it. Maybe he should have had Madam Pomfrey put something on it, after all. Then a thought occurred to him. "Hey, you're no better off!"

"What?"

"You've got your current girlfriend and your sister to tell stories about you! To someone who doesn't know you very well. They'll have a lot more to say about you than they will about me!"

"Oy! You're right. It'll be terrible! Thanks, Harry!"

"Hey, you brought it up." Before Ron could think of a suitable response, the door opened and Seamus, Dean, and Neville came into the room.

"Harry! It's so good to see you. You were fantastic today!" Harry greeted them warmly. They were truly good friends and he had missed them terribly. The five of them spoke briefly about what Harry had been doing. No one asked about Cassie, which Harry was grateful for. He didn't want to have to explain too much about her. Everyone was tired, though, and soon they all extinguished the lamps and shut the curtains around their beds. Harry closed his eyes, feeling sleep drift in on the edges of his consciousness. Then he realized that Ron was tossing in his bed. Harry listened for a moment and, thinking Ron had settled, again closed his eyes. He was again abruptly awakened by Ron's shifting and tossing. This went on for several minutes until Harry finally had had enough.

"What's the deal, Ron? Go to sleep. Aren't you tired?"

"Yeah, it's just . . ."

"He's not used to sleeping up here with us anymore, Harry!" It was Seamus, laughing as he spoke. "He's used to sleeping with Hermione!"

"Sleeping is the key word. We've just slept on the couch. Nothing else!"

"Yeah, yeah. So you say."

"I'm used to, uh, snuggling with her, that's all." Ron sounded kind of embarrassed and Harry thought he should - snuggling??? Gag! Especially with Hermione. Of course, the thought of "snuggling" with Ginny didn't sound too bad. And what he and Cassie had done the



day before was probably even more than "snuggling" so maybe it wouldn't be that bad, after all. Harry listened to Ron tossing and turning for a few more minutes.

"Deal with it, Ron. I'm sure as heck not coming over there to snuggle with you!"

"Yuck!! No you definitely won't." Harry heard Ron's curtains slide open. "As if I'd let you. You're too bony. Hermione's all soft and . . ." Harry slid his own curtains open to face his friend, in the dim light just barely able to discern his outline.

"Please don't finish that sentence, Ron. I really don't want to know!" Then Harry picked up his extra pillow and threw it, hitting Ron square in the face. "Snuggle that! It's soft enough."

Ron just made a spluttering noise and pulled his curtains shut again. Seamus laughed loudly and Harry smiled into the darkness. His last thought as he drifted to sleep was that it was really good to be home.

## Chapter 52

### Meetings before Breakfast

Harry came to consciousness, suddenly, with a vague feeling of unease. Someone was watching him. He tried to shift a little in the warmth of the blankets and felt a weight on his stomach. He opened his eyes and saw two huge green globes directly in front of him.

"AAAAH! Dobby! How many times have I told you not to do that?"

"Many times, Harry Potter. Many times. But Dobby could not help himself. He could not. Dobby can hardly believe that Harry Potter is alive. Dobby should have known better than to think that the great wizard Harry Potter could have been defeated by the Dark Lord. No, no. Those who say those things did not know what a great wizard Harry Potter truly is."

Harry struggled to sit up even though Dobby was still sitting on him, and reached for his glasses. When things came into focus, he looked again at the house elf. "It's good to see you, Dobby. How are you doing?" Dobby was looking clean but he could by no stretch of anyone's imagination be called neat. The elf had a passion for all items of clothing now that he was allowed to wear it and seemed to collect any and all that he could find. And he insisted on wearing most of his entire collection at all times. The only allowance he had made for the fact that it was now summer was that he only wore one knit cap rather than the 20 or 30 or so that he tended to wear in the winter. He still had on multiple socks, though, and none of them matched. Harry forced himself to keep a straight face as he looked at him.

"Oh, sir, sir. That such a great wizard as Harry Potter should ask how Dobby is doing. Such a great honor, sir, that you should even remember his name!"

"Of course, I remember your name, Dobby. After all, you saved my life, remember?" That was their own little private joke. Dobby had actually put Harry's life in danger on a few occasions through the years although he had always been trying to help. He had been helpful, of course, helping with the Gillyweed during the Tri-Wizard

Tournament and warning of a raid by Dolores Umbridge just the year before. But Dobby always laughed and flushed when Harry said this to him.

"It was nothing, sir. Nothing that any good house elf would do for such a wizard as Harry Potter. You let Dobby know if he can do anything else for you."

"Of course, of course."

"Dobby brought you these." Dobby held out two socks, a pair in a way, though the patterns did not match, that had obviously been knitted in great haste. "Dobby stayed up all night knitting them for Harry Potter. Dobby thought Harry Potter might need more socks."

"Thank you, Dobby." Harry took the socks from the elf and looked them over. One sock was green and showed Harry in his Quidditch robes flying on his broomstick. The other was red and showed Harry pointing his wand at a very disgruntled-looking dragon. They were obviously scenes from the battle the evening before and Harry was truly touched. "They're beautiful, Dobby. You must have worked very hard. I'm impressed."

"Then Harry Potter will wear them?"

"Um, well, these are more winter socks, aren't they?" At Dobby's brief nod, Harry smiled. "Then I will wear them this winter. You're a good friend, Dobby. Thank you so much."

"Well, Harry Potter, Dobby must be getting back to the kitchens. Others will wonder where Dobby has gone. The elves are preparing a very big breakfast today. It is a celebration. All the professors are back and students are hungry again." Harry nodded vaguely, glancing at the clock. His meeting with Dumbledore was in 30 minutes. He would have to hurry to get there on time. "Dobby also knows that Harry brought back a Cassie. A pretty girl." Harry suddenly blushed.

"I brought her to protect her. She will be going home today. But she is very pretty, isn't she?" Dobby didn't answer -- he was already out the

door. Harry got out of bed, stretched, and looked around his dorm room. Everyone else was still asleep and although Harry was tempted to wake Ron up, he resisted. He was the only one that needed to meet Dumbledore this early. No point in waking anyone else. A gentle hooting drew his attention automatically to Hedwig's cage and he suddenly realized Hedwig must have returned from a night of hunting. She had returned to her cage. "Ah, Hedwig. I missed you." At this, Hedwig flew over, landing on his outstretched arm and giving his ear an affectionate nip. He petted her for a minute or so and then reluctantly put her back in her cage where she again hooted and then closed her eyes.

Harry pulled on his clothes quickly and tried to do something with his hair. He gave up after a few minutes. Then he brushed his teeth and slipped his robes on over his jeans and T-shirt. He went downstairs to the common room and was pleased to note that overnight a good many of the black ribbons had been removed. There were still a few around the pictures and the black banner was still there, but it looked a lot more cheerful than the night before.

He exited the portrait hole and hoped that by the time he got back, someone else would be available to open it. He did not want to say the ridiculous password that Hermione had suggested when people still thought he was dead. It would just be too embarrassing. He strode down the familiar hallways toward the Headmaster's office, looking at everything with new eyes and feeling a strange love for the place. He had always loved Hogwarts and considered it home, but after being forced to be away for so long, Harry felt that way even stronger now. In a surprisingly short amount of time he was looking up at the gargoyle that protected the stairs to Dumbledore's office. "Canary creams" he said and the gargoyle moved aside, the wall slid open, and Harry stepped onto the stairs which slowly began to rotate upward.

A few moments later, Harry stepped into the familiar office. He had been here a little over 12 hours ago but he felt a lot calmer now than he had on the last occasion. But he did have a lot of questions. And he thought Dumbledore would be willing to answer them.

"Harry." Harry looked up and saw Dumbledore standing at the top of the small circular staircase that graced his office and he smiled broadly.

"Professor Dumbledore." Somehow, in those simple addresses of each other, a warmth of feeling passed between them, an understanding that was deeper than words. There was no need for them to say how much they had missed each other, how scared they had been for each other, how disappointed they were at the outcome of yesterday's battle, or anything else. No, it was all unnecessary.

"I told you yesterday that I would talk to you this morning about several different issues." Harry nodded. He had a lot of questions, but now that the time had come to ask them, he didn't really know where to start. He hoped Dumbledore would begin but after a few moments passed, Dumbledore still hadn't said anything. He tried to catch one the many questions that were fluttering around in his brain like errant sparrows, but they kept eluding his grasp. Finally, Harry managed to say something.

"What sorts of issues, Professor?" Dumbledore smiled kindly at him.

"I'm pleased, Harry, with the outcome of yesterday's battle, even though we didn't manage to succeed in our ultimate aim, killing Voldemort."

"Yeah, uh, yes. You said something about keeping Voldemort away from Hogwarts. That somehow that was important." Suddenly, the sparrows landed in a neat little row, and Harry had a million questions to ask. He just hoped they stayed in place until this one was answered.

"Ah, yes. I thought you might catch onto that. Well, Harry, I'll try to make this fairly simple." Dumbledore sat down in his chair and pulled a small silver gadget over to him. He started fiddling with the delicate dials on it. For some reason, the sight of the gadget reminded Harry of the time a year before when he had completely destroyed the office and that made him think of what he had told Hermione the night before when he was destroying Dumbledore's office again! Harry had a sudden sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He looked around

quickly at the bookshelves, his face flaming. Everything seemed to be in place. The pillows were back to being pillows, and the books all seemed to be looking like, uh, books. He wanted to apologize for making a big mess and not cleaning up after himself but Dumbledore started speaking and Harry didn't want to interrupt.

"Hogwarts, as you may have guessed, is much more than just a school, Harry. You have often heard it said that Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain. Part of that, I must say in all modesty, is due to my presence here. But part of it is just because . . . it is Hogwarts. When the four original founders wanted to organize a school, they searched all over Britain and, I believe, in some other countries as well. They settled on this location, finally, because there is strong magic here, naturally, in the rocks and the grass and the water. I will not try to explain this to you. I dare say you would not understand it. As far as I know, there are only two alive who do understand it. I am one of the two. I think I understand it, at least in part. I think, well, I am quite sure, that Voldemort understands it. I think that somewhere, sometime, someway in his quest for the ultimate knowledge of evil and power and immortality, he came across this information in a text somewhere. He must have realized that he would never control, could never have complete control, of the wizarding world until he controlled Hogwarts." Harry started at that. He couldn't have been more surprised if Dumbledore had told him that Snape was his long-lost brother.

Dumbledore noticed and smiled again, still fiddling with the dials. "Yes, it's true. The founders used the strong magic already here and strengthened it, uh, perhaps a word you would understand is focused it. They took it and focused it and somehow, I could not even begin to tell you how they did this, but they formed it. They put it into the very stones of this castle." He smiled again, vaguely, out the window, and Harry had the impression that he was looking somewhere very far away from this office. "Voldemort wants the strength in these stones, Harry. Oh, yes, he wants immortality, and he wants power, and he wants people to fear him. But more than anything, he wants the stones of this castle. He wants the strength of these stones. If he can add their strength to his . . . ." He sighed deeply and in the early morning sunlight, Harry saw the lines of exhaustion on his face again. "He will not stop trying to take over this castle until he either

succeeds or he is dead. It is that simple. And so, once again, we come to the root of the matter." Harry swallowed. It always came around to this. His job. His. Alone.

"Yeah." Harry stood. "I've got to kill him. It always comes down to that, doesn't it? I can do it. I almost had him last night. He was frightened. He ran from me. I would have had him . . . if he couldn't have apparated." He didn't mention that he had been distracted by the sudden appearance of his godfather. There would be time for discussing that later. When it didn't hurt quite so badly.

"Yes." Dumbledore didn't say anything more.

"We should have had people behind, someone to keep him from going back out the gates . . . if he couldn't have gotten out of the gates . . . maybe it would all be over now."

"That was part of the plan. We actually had a group of Aurors and townspeople coming from Hogsmeade. They were to come in through the gates and block any retreat. Unfortunately, even though they felt their path to the castle was clear and that they would be able to take it without a fight, the Death Eaters were worried about some resistance coming behind them once people figured out what was happening. So, Voldemort or one of his inner circle, set up some very powerful wards and force fields We had not expected that, and our people were not able to get past them quickly enough. They did arrive at the very end of the battle, you may have noticed."

Harry nodded vaguely and sat back down. He couldn't remember much after Fawkes . . . just the screaming he had done and the bright green spell he had cast. He wished he had cast it one second sooner. "I can't remember . . . I don't . . ."

"Well, it's no matter." They both sat silently for quite a few minutes. Dumbledore had stopped fiddling with the dials on his gadget and Harry stared out the window.

"Um, speaking of coming up behind you . . . ." Harry started, unsure of exactly what he wanted to ask, but knowing that he had to find out.

"There were no . . . Slytherins, not at battle, not at dinner. But they are still at school."

"Yes. We were worried about the students in that house." Dumbledore had a rather peculiar look on his face and Harry couldn't decipher it. "Some, perhaps, would have fought on our side, protecting the school, but . . . some would be fighting their own parents . . . or uncles or cousins. Could we ask that of them? Could we . . . take a chance? We decided that no, we could not. So, we simply sealed them in their common room. They could not exit last night after 5 until this morning. They were served dinner last night and I am sure that none suffered too greatly for their ordeal. Of course, they will come out again this morning for breakfast and they will have to deal with some rather, um, unpleasant news."

"You mean, about their parents?"

"Yes. And the fact that a certain Harry Potter is still alive. I think that not all the . . . students will be happy about that." Harry smiled vaguely. Any other time, any other circumstances, perhaps he would have laughed. But he didn't really think that even the sour expression on Malfoy's face would make him feel better at this moment. The weight of his responsibility and all of its consequences settled heavy on his shoulders this morning. He shrugged and then grimaced to himself. That would not help matters.

"But, Snape . . . he should have. . . fought with the teachers. I mean, he's a member of the Order. He could have helped." Harry's voice grew louder at the end of his sentence. He still, if he was honest with himself, blamed Snape for everything that had gone wrong the year before even though he knew that he himself had certainly made the ultimate fatal errors. Anytime that a fault of Snape's could be pointed out, Harry made sure to do it.

"Yes, perhaps." Dumbledore was patient with Harry's feelings about Snape and somehow it always made Harry feel ashamed. "But, if he had been seen, actively fighting against Voldemort, with the Order . . . Well, there would have been no possibility of his ever spying for us again. And," he raised his hand when Harry was about to speak, "in spite of everything, he is a good spy. No, a great spy."



And, he is a valuable resource. We simply locked him in his office after administering a very strong sleeping potion. He can, in all honesty, say when questioned that he was unconscious through the entire battle and thus could not have helped the Death Eaters."

"Oh." Again, there were several long minutes of silence and Harry looked over at Fawkes' perch where the now-ugly baby bird slept. "Um, Professor Dumbledore? Did they really change that much?"

"Did what really change that much, Harry?"

"Oh, my letters. My letters to you."

"Yes. Every day in your letters you asked to come back, asked if some other way could be found, said you hated it there. Then, one day, you . . . just said that the weather was nice there. At first, I thought you had just reconciled yourself to your fate, unpleasant though it may be. But, the next day . . . Well, the next day I knew that you had met someone, a friend perhaps, but I suspected something more." Harry flushed beet red and he stared hard at an imaginary speck of dust on the surface of Dumbledore's desk. Dumbledore pulled out a small packet of envelopes and Harry realized with a shock that they were addressed in his handwriting and that these were the letters he had sent to Dumbledore each morning. Dumbledore opened the one on the top of the pile and pulled out the folded parchment inside.

"Dear Professor, I am well. I hope you are, too. Nothing too exciting is happening here."

"That's it? From that, you could tell about . . . Cassie?" Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

"You asked how I was doing and you studiously avoided telling me anything at all. Classic signs of someone who is trying very hard to not say anything. Signs of someone who is very happy themselves, perhaps in love, and wanting everyone else to be just as happy."

Harry shook his head. "You got all that from three sentences?"

"I have, over the years, spoken and interacted with many students, Harry. Things don't really change very much when it comes to dealing with human emotions like love."

"Oh. I don't know if I . . . love her."

"Um, well things would be difficult, it is true. And, your feelings for Miss Weasley . . . Yes. But there are different sorts of love, you know. You loved Sirius and he loved you. You love Remus. You love your friends Ron and Hermione. You can love Miss Robinson also." Harry knew that what Dumbledore said was true, but he also knew that he had never even considered doing to any one of those people his headmaster had listed the sorts of things he had done with Cassie, so he wasn't sure that this was a fair comparison. He nodded instead of saying that, though, meaning to drop the subject. But then suddenly it all came rushing out.

"But I did love her. I . . . she doesn't want to love me. Not in that way. She says that I . . . need Ginny and she's right, in a way, I guess, and I don't know what to do now. I mean, she's got to go home, today, and then I'll never see her again and . . . ." Harry's voice trailed off miserably. This was all very embarrassing to admit. Dumbledore was nodding sympathetically, though, rather than laughing.

"And actually, on top of all those already very confusing thoughts, I need to add one more. We need to discuss Miss Robinson in some depth this morning. Professor Lupin should be here soon. He is important to this discussion." Harry remembered then that Remus had said he would be here for this meeting. He wondered what he could possibly contribute to the discussion of his very confused love-life. Remus didn't really seem to have had that much experience . . . but Harry trusted Remus and just hoped that he wouldn't laugh too loudly when he heard of Harry's predicament. The office door opened, and Remus Lupin stepped into the office. Harry wondered momentarily if somehow Dumbledore had a signal rigged outside in the hall. If not, the timing was a very strange coincidence. But Harry didn't want to spend time wondering about that. He wanted to know what Remus would say about Cassie.

Remus smiled happily at both Dumbledore and Harry and then clapped Harry on the back. "It's so good to see you, Harry. It almost makes me believe in miracles." He sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs and looked between Dumbledore and Harry. "So, what's going on?"

"I believe you have met Miss Cassie Robinson?" Lupin nodded at Dumbledore's question.

"Yes, last night at dinner. Pretty girl, blonde, blue-eyed." Harry blushed.

"Perhaps I should let Harry explain further." Harry grimaced. Great.

"I met her in London." Lupin nodded again, not understanding the problem, obviously. "I was supposed to be dead. I was living as a Muggle." Suddenly, the light dawned in Lupin's eyes.

"She's a Muggle." This time it was Harry doing the nodding. "She's a Muggle. And she's here. And she knows about you. And Voldemort. And Hogwarts. And magic." Harry nodded after each brief statement, his stomach sinking farther and farther toward his feet.

"I had to do it. I mean . . . she would have been killed, at least. Maybe worse. It was Malfoy and Crabbe and Goyle. She was in my house when Ron and Hermione came and the portkey, somehow it alerted the Death Eaters and they couldn't get in but we couldn't get out and it was all right for us but she couldn't go home and . . . ." Somehow the whole story came tumbling out, almost faster than he could spit out the words and then he was telling about the sudden terror with the portkey and then he fell silent and he felt the two older wizards' eyes on him and he wasn't sure what to do next. So he did nothing.

Finally, into the silence, Dumbledore spoke. "She needs to be taken home, Remus. She will have to be taken home the same way she came, using a portkey. As soon as possible. And when you get her there, you will have to modify her memory. She will need to forget everything. I think she should not even remember that she ever met Harry." Now Harry felt absolutely nauseated and he was glad that he didn't have any food in his stomach.

"No!" It was sudden and sharp but Harry didn't take it back. "No. I don't want her memory modified. I don't want her to forget me." He realized the complete and total impossibility of what he was asking but he could do nothing else. "She's a good person. She's trustworthy. And she's good at keeping secrets. She kept some of mine."

"You know, Harry, that . . ." Harry interrupted Remus before he could finish his statement.

"I know. But I, I need her." Two puzzled gazes met his. "Not that way. It's different now. I really do love Ginny . . . and Cassie knows that. And then last night Ginny, well, she kissed me and I kissed her back . . . and, I don't know, it just felt right." Harry blushed at the thought he was saying all of this to Dumbledore and Remus. However, they both nodded with comprehending expressions and Harry wondered for a brief moment before continuing on if perhaps both men had more experience with relationships than he originally thought. "And, uh, she's easy to talk to. She understands me. I . . . I want to be able to write to her and tell her things. She's smart. She's the one who thought of flying out and the one who said we should wear the Quidditch robes. I've never met a Muggle like her before."

"But is it fair to her? After all, she has seen a lot of things that are difficult and may be painful for her to remember." Harry hadn't thought about that until Remus said it.

"Oh."

Dumbledore spoke again. "Perhaps this is not a decision that we should be making for Miss Robinson, but one that she should be making for herself." After a moment's further thought, he repeated himself. "Yes, I think that would be the best option. She needs to make the decision for herself. We will meet again at, um, 11:00 this morning. That will give me time to get some Ministry business settled that I cannot put off any further. And then we will present the options to her, get to know her a little better, and help her make a decision that is best for everyone. Remus, please be sure to be here so she can get to know you better. She needs to trust you implicitly. And Harry, please bring Mr. Ron Weasley, Miss Ginny Weasley, and Miss

Granger as well as Miss Robinson to the meeting. I think they may all have some insight into the discussion." His face cleared as though the subject was dropped completely. "All right, Harry, if you go downstairs now you will meet your friends as they head down to breakfast. I think perhaps that you should not mention the subject of the meeting to any of them beforehand. It might cause concern and worry when today should be a day of happiness." Harry left the office quickly and stepped onto the slowly spiraling staircase, exiting through the door behind the gargoyle. He crossed the hall quickly, descending the stairs to the entryway where, just as he knew he would, he found Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Cassie all heading into the Great Hall for breakfast. They smiled up at him and Harry smiled back. His stomach growled and Harry thought how pleasant it would be to eat a breakfast he had not had to cook. Just as he reached the bottom step, though, his pleasant mood was spoiled as he heard a familiar drawling voice echo through the room.

"So, it's true. I heard the portraits but thought they were confused. But it's true. The great Potty, Saint Potter, has learned how to rise from the dead!"

## Chapter 53

### Surprises

Harry spotted Draco Malfoy easily in the nearly-empty entrance hall. He was, as usual, flanked by his two cronies, Crabbe and Goyle and all three of them were smirking up at him. Malfoy continued, his voice raised a little so that anyone interested could hear him. "It's a pity you hadn't figured it out years ago, Potter. Maybe you could have saved your worthless Muggle-loving parents and your mangy godfather, too." Harry felt the familiar anger and frustration rise in his chest but he thought quickly of Cassie and looked over to where the four friends had been standing. It was imperative that Draco not see her or find out about her. Apparently, Hermione and Ginny had had the same thought because all three of the girls were gone and only Ron was standing there, wand out, looking up at Harry for some clue of what he wanted to do. Harry forced down his emotional response. If he could be calm around Voldemort, Draco Malfoy was certainly no threat.

"Yeah. I agree. I wish I somehow could have brought my parents back from the dead, Malfoy. However, maybe there's still hope for you." Harry kept his voice calm but carefully enunciated. He wanted to make sure that Malfoy understood every word he said. "I could owl your mother just in case. Last time I saw your father - last night - he was getting his butt kicked by, um, yeah, the good guys! By now, for all I know, he might already be dead." Draco's pale face went even paler. He said nothing, so Harry continued. "Have you heard from your dear mother yet, this morning? No? Well, then we can always hope, can't we?" And even though Harry knew this was not the case, he thought he was probably the only student who did, and it was a good insult, so, . . . "Anyway, I noticed that none of you brave Slytherins left the safety of your dungeon to come out and fight with Voldemort. Couldn't handle us, huh?" Harry made sure to put every ounce of contempt that he felt for all dark wizards everywhere into that last sentence, and Draco had finally had enough. This time, his voice was not only raised; he was yelling.

He pulled his wand out and aimed it at Harry. Harry already had his out and Ron's was aimed carefully at Draco. Malfoy's two goons had

faded away as they usually did now when confrontation was eminent between Harry and Malfoy. They had been on the receiving end of one too many hexes and didn't stick around to get another one. "Never, never mention my father or mother again! You and your kind aren't worthy to mention his name or the name of his Master!" Harry was about to respond when an oily voice came up from the steps that led to the dungeons.

"Mr. Malfoy. 10 points from Slytherin. Quiet down immediately. Weasley, 20 points from Gryffindor for having your wand out in the entry hall. Now I want silence. I have a headache that would make Potter scream, my pain potion won't touch it, and the noise you two are making is not helping." Ron started to protest, but Harry shook his head quickly. This was going to be good. Harry stood on the steps, waiting for the inevitable. He didn't have to wait very long. Snape stepped from the stairs to the dungeon and turned the corner apparently to head into the Great Hall. He followed Malfoy's eyes and saw Harry standing on the step. Harry couldn't help it. He really couldn't. He smirked.

Snape's face changed expressions from aggrieved to, well, Harry really couldn't tell what the expression was. It was part shock, part disbelief, and part (to be honest) dismay. And then there was something else. Harry didn't know what that part was, but he didn't care. Snape changed directions suddenly, sweeping like a malevolent bat up the same staircase where Harry was standing. "Potter." His lips curled. "Ten points from Gryffindor for still being alive." Harry caught a quick glimpse of Ron's face, shaking his head again. This was actually fairly funny. Then Snape drew abreast of Harry and his face settled into a glare. "And five points more, just for the hell of it." Harry laughed but Snape ignored him and continued up the steps. Ron grinned up at him and Harry continued down the stairs. Draco just scowled up at him and stalked into the Great Hall.

"That was worth the 35 points we lost, I think."

Ron grunted in agreement. "I really don't think it's against school rules to still be alive, though. Maybe we should protest it." They both looked over at the huge hourglasses that kept track of the house

points and several rubies left the bottom of the Gryffindor hourglass and joined the others in the top.

"Nah. It's not worth it. It looks like we're going to take the house cup anyway." The leaving feast was in a few days, Harry imagined and it looked like Gryffindor had a fairly sizeable lead.

"Yeah. Plus Dumbledore is sure to award Gryffindor a few more for last night and there won't be any for Slytherin." Harry didn't say anything in response. Why bother to make the Slytherins look better in Ron's eyes? Malfoy and company were still gits. They both entered the Great

Hall a minute later and sought out their friends at the Gryffindor table, sitting down quickly. Harry sat next to Ginny and Cassie like he had the night before, and across from Hermione and Ron, who had just sat down next to her. Harry scanned the table for bacon and eggs, saw the platter and pulled it over to him. He smiled at the three girls.

"So what happened out there in the hall?" Hermione asked the two boys as they sat down and started piling food on their plates. Ron and Harry filled her in and everybody laughed at Harry's description of the look on Snape's face as he realized that Harry was standing on the stairs. Hermione pursed her lips in disgust at Snape's taking points away from Harry for just being alive, but Harry told her not to bother to protest.

"We all heard what that boy said to you," Cassie said. "He should have had more points taken off than you."

"Well, Malfoy's in Snape's house, so he doesn't get . . ."

"That was Malfoy?" She practically hissed. "The son of the . . . Death Eater? Draco?"

"Yeah. That's him." Harry was kind of surprised that the girls hadn't filled Cassie in on that already, but Ginny explained.

"Seamus was here talking to Hermione, so we couldn't really say anything before."



"He's a mean little git, isn't he?" Cassie said and Harry laughed in response, blushing bright red as a bit of toast flew out of his mouth and hit Ron who was sitting across from him. Ron scowled and brushed off the offending piece of toast.

"Yeah. That describes him pretty well." Harry didn't want to talk about Malfoy, though. "What are you having for breakfast?"

"Oh, I don't know. I was going to have an egg and toast but there's no more wheat toast. That boy took the last piece."

"Seamus?"

"I think that was his . . . hey, was that Seamus Finnegan?" Harry nodded and grabbed a piece of bacon.

"I won't tell him you think his name is stupid, okay?" Ginny looked confused at Cassie's having heard Seamus' name before but before Harry could explain about the museum and the old wizard, a plate of wheat toast appeared next to Cassie's plate.

"Ooh, wonderful. Those elves really know what they're doing." She grabbed a piece off the plate and bit into it. She took two pieces of toast off the plate and turned slightly to pass it to Harry and Ginny. Harry was just going to politely decline when he noticed something pinned to her robe.

"What are you wearing?!" He actually didn't need to ask. He recognized the badge. "Hermione! Honestly!"

Hermione looked up, her eyes flashing. "She happens to agree with me about the elves."

"Hermione, that's not fair. Cassie doesn't know anything about the situation."

"She just hasn't been brainwashed by the . . . ."

"She's supposed to be blending in!" At this, Cassie looked a little confused.

"This isn't blending in? Hermione said that . . . ."

"Do you see anyone else wearing the stupid things? Take it off. You're just calling attention to yourself." Harry watched, rather exasperated, as Cassie undid the pin of the S.P.E.W. badge and pulled it off her robes.

"They're not stupid. Like I said, Cassie agrees with me about the elves' slavery and she . . . ."

Harry just scowled. "Stop it. I don't want to hear about it. You only presented one side to the story. Ginny, why didn't you stop her?" Ginny just shrugged.

"I don't think Hermione is really wrong about it, it's just that I don't know how much chance she has of changing anything. And as far as Cassie wearing the badge, it doesn't bother me. You and Ron wore them for a while, if you remember correctly." Harry just scowled harder and drank his pumpkin juice. But after a minute, he decided that he wanted to change the subject.

"So, how did the three of you sleep?"

"Sleep?" Ginny said, purposely trying to sound exhausted. "What's that?"

It was Ron's turn to scowl this time. "You mean you didn't sleep much? Oh, you're all going to collapse." But truthfully, his interest seemed to be more with Hermione than with either his sister or the Muggle girl sitting at their table.

"Oh, we got a bit. I just have one question for you, Harry." Ginny touched his arm, as he was concentrating on reaching for the platter of bacon.

"Yeah?"

"Did you really ask to play a game of chess?" She put a subtle emphasis on the last word and then looked innocently up into his face, like she meant nothing by it.

Harry spluttered and felt the heat rising in his face. He turned to Cassie feeling very embarrassed. "Did you have to bring that up? Now I'll never-

"It wasn't me! It was Hermione!" Harry looked across at Hermione and she just winked and smiled.

"That's, um, of minor seriousness compared to some of the other things we talked about last night!"

Both Ron and Harry groaned. "Don't tell me," Harry said. "You spent all night talking about the two of us and telling every embarrassing thing you could think of."

"Basically, yes." Ginny laughed and her eyes sparkled.

"You were right, Ron." Harry wanted to bang his forehead against the table. "So, what's the damage? What sorts of, um, stories did you three discuss?"

"There was the deboning incident."

"And the time the twins turned you bright yellow, Ron."

"And the story about you nearly falling off your broom, Harry, that first year."

"And the time that . . . ."

"No more. No more." Ron was covering his ears. Hermione took some pity on him.

"Sorry, Ron. We won't tell you any more." Ginny gave a funny little smirk and put her arms around Harry's waist, turning on the bench to reach him.

"Yeah, sorry. We shouldn't have told you about it." Hermione patted Ron's arm consolingly.

Harry laughed. "So it's okay to embarrass us in private, as long as we don't know about it?"

"Yep. Hey, did you guys talk last night? Before you went to sleep?" Both Ginny and Hermione looked like they were unsure if they wanted to know, but were compelled by some morbid anxiety to find out if they talked about them.

Harry laughed and the girls looked even more nervous. "I didn't want to talk. I wanted to sleep. But Ron had a hard time settling down." Ron looked up at him suddenly, eyes wide. Harry ignored his look of pleading. It was too funny not to tell.

"Why?" Ginny asked innocently.

Hermione looked slightly nervous but didn't say anything. "He wanted something soft and warm to cuddle." Ron let out some sort of choking noise and Hermione's face matched Ron's hair color. Cassie and Ginny both laughed and Ginny started to say something, but she broke off before she could because there was a sudden sound of hundreds of owls and they all looked up. There was a lot more mail than usual this morning and Harry thought this probably was because of the incident the day before. Parents had undoubtedly heard about the battle and were trying to find out exactly what had happened. Plus, he noted, most of the owls were carrying Daily Prophets. Hermione got a copy of the paper and Ron and Ginny got a note, most likely from their parents, as it was one of the Weasley's family owls that brought it. Harry didn't get anything, but he wasn't too surprised. He turned back to Cassie to try to explain away any other embarrassing stories she had heard, but the seat next to him was empty. He panicked and started looking around frantically. Where had she gone? He suddenly felt a warmth next to his knee and he looked down to see her, huddling under the table. "What are you doing?"

"Um, I'm . . . hiding from the birds."

"They're owls."

"Owls . . . birds, same thing."

"Get up here. Come on, before somebody notices you." She shook her head.

"They're still up there."

"Come on, get up here. They're not going to hurt you." She hesitantly crawled out from under the table and sat back down next to Harry. He looked around to see if anyone had noticed and saw that a few students from another table were looking strangely at Cassie. Before he could say anything, Ginny spoke up.

"She dropped her fork." The students nodded and turned back to their own mail.

Harry looked at Cassie. "Scared of birds?"

"I didn't think so." She was flushed a bright red color. "It's just . . . there were so many and, I mean . . . I wasn't sure." She looked down at her plate, obviously embarrassed.

"Owls bring the mail. Every morning."

"Owls?" She narrowed her eyes a little "Oh, yeah. Send an owl to Dumbledore." She remembered what that old wizard had said at the museum and it suddenly made sense to her. Before she could comment, though, Ron interrupted her.

"Harry, you've got a new nickname."

"Tell me you're joking, please." He covered his face. He had been the Boy Who Lived until last year when he became the Boy Who Lied and then back to the Boy Who Lived. He didn't want to know what it was now.

"The Boy Who Still Lives." Ginny made gagging noises and Hermione laughed at the look on Harry's face.

"That's horrible. The rest of the articles aren't bad, though. At least they got most of the details right." Hermione read parts of the paper out loud and they all commented on the fairly decent reporting. Hermione read part of an article about Death Eater captures and casualties and Harry wanted to make a very loud comment so that Malfoy would hear him, but he had already left the hall so he didn't. What was the point? Cassie was fascinated with the moving pictures on the front page. There were no pictures of the battle, of course, as no photographers had been present at Hogwarts at the time, but there were plenty of shots of the major participants including an old one of Harry riding a broom during a Quidditch game, apparently trying to portray the way he looked fighting yesterday. There was a big picture of Fudge and a smaller one of Dumbledore. After a few minutes Hermione fell silent and folded the paper. "I'll read the rest later. So what's on everyone's agenda today?"

"Um, Dumbledore wants us in his office at 11."

"Us who?"

"All five of us. Ginny, what are you going to be doing for the next couple of hours?"

"We got a note from Mum. She'll be coming from the village this morning and wants us to come with her and Dad up to the hospital to see Charlie."

"Oh. Give Charlie my best. I still feel horrible about his being hurt. Tell him I'll get up to see him this afternoon."

"Okay, but Harry, Charlie isn't going to blame you, so stop blaming yourself. Ron, are you about done? They should be here any minute now." Ginny finished her food and shoved the plate back and it disappeared. She stood up, and Harry stood up next to her. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Gin?"

"Um, sure. Ron's eating slowly anyway." Ron scowled at Ginny and then went back to talking quietly with Hermione. Harry and Ginny stepped away from the table.

"I want to show Cassie a few of the sites around here today before that meeting. She's going home right after that. I was going to take you along with us, but now . . . ."

"Oh, that's fine. Look, Harry. You don't need to worry about hurting my feelings or whatever. Cassie and I had a nice long talk last night and I'm all right with things. She's a really great girl and I . . . I'm glad she was there for you." Harry looked with new eyes at Ginny, a great girl herself whom he had known for six years. She still continued to amaze him.

"You are so wonderful, Ginny. You know that I really love you, don't you?" Her eyes widened, she blushed with obvious pleasure and nodded slowly.

"Thanks, Harry. I love you, too." It wasn't until a long time later that Harry had time to think about that exchange and realize why Ginny had looked so surprised. That was the first time they had really said that to each other. But he didn't regret it. He did love her. And it was time he told her that.

Harry looked up at the staff table and headed there to talk to Hagrid. He would need his help if the surprise for Cassie was going to be really special. Not very many of the teachers were sitting there. Harry supposed they all had various things to do. Not even Dumbledore had made it. McGonagall was there and smiled at him. He returned her smile. Harry had noticed that Snape never had come into breakfast. Too bad, he had really wanted Cassie to see him. Not that he would have dared introduce them. But he was interested in Cassie's opinion of him - good or bad? She seemed to have an instinct about that sort of thing. He glanced back at Cassie. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were still sitting there by her, but he had better hurry. It wasn't safe for her to be sitting there alone and he had gotten the distinct impression that Ginny was anxious for Ron and Hermione to hurry so they could all go together to see Charlie.

Harry hurriedly explained to Hagrid what he wanted to do and Hagrid agreed to it readily. Good. Harry hadn't been too sure if he would be willing this morning. After all, at least two Centaurs had been killed the night before and he was also trying to deal with two full-grown

giants and Grawp as well. However, Hagrid said he didn't mind and Harry was grateful. He wouldn't have wanted to do this without Hagrid's help. He moved back to his friends.

"Good. Come on, Ron, let's go."

"All right, all right. Keep your knickers on. I'm sure that Charlie won't notice if we're a minute or so later than Mum and Dad." He helped Hermione up and all five of them walked out of the Great Hall. They split up a few minutes later and Harry reminded everyone to meet him at the gargoyle in front of Dumbledore's office at about 10:50 so they wouldn't be late for the meeting.

When it was just Harry and Cassie again, she asked, "I thought I was going home first thing this morning."

"Professor Dumbledore wants to talk to you a little before he sends you back home and that is the earliest he could see you. Is that all right?"

"Yes . . . it's just that . . . You don't think I'll have any trouble getting home, do you?"

"No, not at all. Don't worry. Professor Dumbledore will make sure you get home safely. But since we have about two hours before we have that meeting, I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise? Is it a good surprise?"

"Of course it is. What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Well, I don't know. The last time you surprised me wasn't so pleasant."

"What do you mean? I thought you loved the telescope and everything?"

"The telescope? Oh, Harry, I loved the telescope. You know that! I was meaning when you told me you were a wizard!"



"Oh." For some reason, that made Harry feel a little depressed.

"I didn't mean that like it came out, Harry. Not the magic and stuff. I meant more like the war and the Death Eaters and the portkey and everything. I mean, someone was trying to kill you!"

"Oh, yeah. I guess that wasn't too great of a surprise was it? Well, this is more like the telescope surprise."

"Great! What is it?"

Harry laughed. "If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise! You've got to figure that out eventually, Cassie." She looked a little sheepish.

"So, when do I get this surprise?"

"Pretty soon." Just then, Harry saw someone coming out of the Great Hall and smiled in greeting. A thought crossed his mind. "Cassie, will you just wait right here for a minute?"

"Sure, I guess so. Where are you going?" She looked worried and Harry couldn't blame her.

"Just over to talk to someone. I'll be right back." Harry stepped over and spoke to his friend, asking if what he had in mind would be possible. After being assured it would and that he would be willing to help, Harry rejoined Cassie. "Everything's set. Come on." They walked together over to the front doors. Harry opened them quickly, pleased at the bright sunlight that entered. Cassie looked hesitant, almost fearful as she glanced out onto the grounds. "What's wrong?"

"I'm . . . What's out there?"

"Grass." Harry couldn't understand what she meant and then it hit him. The last time she had gone out those doors, she had walked into the middle of a big battle. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not being very sensitive. I'll look and make sure things are okay, all right?" He stepped out onto the steps and looked over the lawns. There were scorch marks and burned areas but no dead bodies or anything were still lying around. "Things are all right, Cassie. Come on." She stepped out

onto the steps to join him and looked out over the lawns like he had done.

"It's beautiful here. The lake, and the forest . . . And the castle is incredible! I can't believe I've never heard of this place. I mean, tourists must be . . ."

"We don't have tourists." Harry didn't really want to explain this to her, but he probably owed it to her.

"You've got to. There's no way that people wouldn't love to come see this . . ."

"No, really. We don't. See, the castle is hidden." She got a very puzzled look on her face.

"Hidden?"

"Yeah. It's got Muggle-repellant charms on it and Hermione says it's unplotable. In other words, you can't put it on a map or chart or anything." Cassie didn't say anything for a long time, just looking at Harry like she expected him to start laughing and say he was kidding.

Finally, she spoke. "Muggle-repellant charms? What does that mean?"

"Well, it means that if a Muggle comes by, they don't see the castle. Instead, they see signs warning them that the ruin they do see is unsafe and they can't come closer."

Another long period of silence greeted that statement. "But, I'm a Muggle. And I can see the castle."

"Yeah. I don't really . . . I think it's cause you came into the castle first and so you were like inside the magic and so . . . Well, I don't really understand it myself. I guess we could ask Professor Dumbledore. Or maybe Hermione knows more about it than I do. If you really want to know. . . ." Cassie shook her head.

"I would say that what you are describing is impossible, but I don't think I know the meaning of that word anymore, so I won't say it. I'll just take your word for it. I'm not really sure I believe you, though." Harry shrugged in response.

"That's fine. It doesn't matter anyway. Come on, your surprise starts over here and I want to have a few minutes before my friend comes out."

"Okay. Are you sure I'm going to like this?"

"Positive. Well, pretty sure." Now that he thought about it, maybe . . . but then they were there and it was time to get started. He turned and looked up at the tower where his dorm was located, and called loudly. "Accio Firebolt!" Cassie gasped in surprise as his broom suddenly flew out of his window and dropped steadily until it stopped right by Harry's hand.

"That's incredible! That spell seems to be pretty handy."

"Yeah. It's a good one. I learned it in fourth year." Harry let go of the broom and it hovered in mid-air. "Ta-Da! This is your surprise!"

"Oh. Well, I've already seen you ride the broom. It is incredible but . . . ."

"No. You're not going to watch me ride it. You're going to ride it!"

"What? No. No. I couldn't, I mean . . . no."

"Come on. You can hang on to me."

"You mean I'd be riding with you?"

"Yeah. What do you think?" Maybe this hadn't been a great idea after all. Harry remembered how Cassie had said that she wanted to go sky diving and how she would love to be able to fly. He thought that she would think riding a broomstick was fantastic but maybe he was wrong. "If you don't want to . . . we don't have to. I mean, we could . . ."

"Do you really think I could?"

"Yeah. Climb on. We'll stay close to the ground until you feel comfortable, okay?" She nodded enthusiastically but she definitely looked a little nervous as she put her hand on the broom. Harry considered for a moment how to do this. He didn't know whether to have her get on first or whether he should hold the broom steady for her. She hesitantly put her leg up to hook it over the broomstick and the broom moved. Harry caught her, laughing. "I guess I better get on first."

He climbed on quickly and planted his feet firmly on the ground. She hesitantly gathered up her robes and swung her right leg over the broom, sitting down hard and quickly grabbing onto Harry. Her legs were shorter than Harry's so her feet didn't touch the ground. She wobbled for a few moments, then grabbed Harry harder around the waist. "I don't know if this is a good idea, Harry. You make it look easy but I can't even get on the stupid thing."

"That's natural. Just relax. You won't fall off."

"Aaah, are you sure about that?"

"Yeah." Harry tried to sound more confident than he really felt. He wasn't sure Muggles could really ride brooms but thought that as long as he stayed close to the ground, she couldn't get hurt too badly.

"Hey. This isn't as hard to sit on as I thought. It's kind of, um, comfortable really."

"They're charmed to be more comfortable, but don't fool yourself. They can still hurt bad if you move wrong."

"Great. Thanks for telling me. Um, you're not going to fall off, are you?"

"No." Harry grimaced. He guessed he could understand her worry if Ginny and Hermione had mentioned the few times that he had fallen off. But those had been special circumstances, none of which were

likely to happen today. He pushed gently off the ground, rising to about five feet. Cassie tightened her arms around him almost to the point of pain but he just steeled himself against it. She'd relax in a moment. He hoped, sincerely hoped. "There. That's not so bad, is it?" They had flown about 100 feet or so and then turned around and come back to where they started. Cassie hadn't said a word and she still retained a near-death grip on him. He rose a little higher and heard a small squeak behind him.

"Oooh! This is great!" So she liked it. That was a relief although she might have just been saying that as she still had her fists clenched in his robes. He flew the same easy circle that he had before, nice and slow, keeping the broom steady as he returned again to where they started although they were now several feet higher than they had been. A door opened and Colin Creevey came out of it. He looked up at Harry and waved.

"All right. We're going down to meet Colin. You'll like him. Hey, Colin."

"Harry. Hi." He looked curiously at Cassie and Harry introduced her.

"This is Cassie. She's a Muggle-born friend of Ginny's. She's never ridden a Firebolt before and I thought I'd take her out on a spin." Colin nodded without comment. Harry continued. "This is Colin. He's Muggle-born, too. He's a great photographer."

"A photographer?" Cassie was really confused, Harry could tell but he didn't try to enlighten her. It might make Colin more suspicious. Not that Harry didn't trust Colin, because he did. He just didn't want to take unnecessary chances.

"Yeah. He's going to take your picture on the broom, all right? That way you'll remember it." Harry sincerely hoped this was the case, anyway. "How high up can we be and still let you get a good picture?"

"Well, I could get my broom and then you could be as high as you want. If you want me on the ground, though, I'd say maybe 30 or 40 feet."

"Oh, we won't go that high up. Hang on, Cassie." Harry rose to about 20 feet and then felt Cassie's arms relax around him.

"Oh, Harry! This is so fantastic! I've never felt anything like this in my entire life!" Harry stayed close to Colin for a few minutes. After a few minutes, Colin started walking toward the Forbidden Forest and Harry smiled to himself. He got a little more adventurous and flew a little faster, angling up until he guessed they were about 50 feet up and the air was blowing fast through his robes and hair. Cassie was laughing, holding onto him tightly but looking all around her. "This is so incredible! I can't believe you do this all the time!" Harry started flying toward the Forbidden Forest also, sighting Hagrid's hut below and bringing the broom in for a gentle landing nearby. Cassie laughed as she got off the broom. "That was great! Thank you so much!" She hugged him tightly and Harry hugged her back.

"That's not the whole surprise, though. The best part is still to come."

"There's more?"

"Yeah. At least, I hope so." Harry spotted Colin and Hagrid ahead and he led Cassie over to where they were standing. Hagrid had done what Harry had asked. That was fortunate. It had probably been kind of tricky on such short notice.

"Arry, um, Cassie, isn't it? I found 'em. Lucky, really." Harry stepped aside and let Cassie look for the first time into the paddock. He watched her face carefully and was very pleased with her reaction.

First, her eyes widened and then she rubbed them, shaking her head. "It . . . it's impossible. I can't believe it. Oh, Harry! Oh, thank you! Thank you!" She approached the fence, staring in absolute transfixed wonder at the unicorns inside.

"It was Hagrid that found them. They live in the forest, but they're hard to find sometimes." However, Harry knew Cassie wasn't listening. Hagrid stepped up to the fence and hopped over it, surprisingly spry for a man as big as he was. Harry also stepped over into the paddock. Cassie stood on the fence, not paying much attention to them.

After a minute or so, Hagrid finally spoke up. "Come'n in. You can pet 'em, if you're gentle."

"What?" Her voice was hoarse with shock. Harry smiled at her.

"Come on in. They won't hurt you." Cassie climbed hesitantly over the fence, stepping close to Harry but he pushed her gently toward Hagrid. "Go up there with him. They like girls better than boys. They will let Hagrid near them, though." Colin stayed outside the fence, aiming his camera carefully at the mother and foal. The gleaming white coat of the mother was almost painful to the eyes in the sunlight and the golden coat of the foal contrasted beautifully with the green of the forest behind them. The mother pawed the ground with her golden front hoof and snorted nervously.

Hagrid approached carefully and petted her carefully with his huge hand. The mother unicorn gentled immediately and a moment later, Cassie approached the giant and placed her hand tentatively next to his. Hagrid stepped back and Cassie petted both the mother and the foal for several long minutes, the look of utter delight on her face something that Harry thought almost rivaled the unicorns in beauty. Colin had been snapping pictures for several minutes before he finally called Harry over.

"I've got some really great ones - both on the broom and here. She's a pretty girl, photographs well."

"Yeah, great. Thanks, Colin. How long does it take to develop them?"

"Um, about 30 minutes or so."

"So they'll move?"

"Oh, yeah. They'll move. Otherwise, it takes longer. The potion that . . . Oh, never mind. You don't care. When do you want the pictures?"

"Do you know where Dumbledore's office is?"

"No. Never been there." Harry couldn't believe that. Obviously, Colin didn't get into the sorts of trouble that Harry and his friends did.

"Well, then, can you meet me in the entrance hall at about 10:45?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Just bring the best shots. You can destroy the rest." Colin nodded and headed back to the castle. Harry leaned against the fence, watching Cassie. Hagrid was talking to her now and she was nodding. Harry couldn't hear them but could imagine that the half giant was waxing poetic about the wonder and magical properties of unicorns. Hagrid, of course, thought all creatures were amazing and he did truly love the unicorns although if you asked his Care of Magical Creatures students, they would probably think he favored things like blast-ended skrewts more. Finally, the mother unicorn seemed to have had enough and started pulling away from Cassie. Hagrid ushered Cassie back over to Harry.

"Ere she is, 'Arry. You were right. She was good with 'em. I've got to run. Got a million things to do today. The giants are heading back and need directions." Harry didn't pursue that. He would prefer to remain ignorant. Hagrid stepped back over the fence and headed into the forest. Cassie's eyes were shining, huge in her face and when they were also standing on the other side of the fence, she looked up at Harry.

"That was the most amazing thing ever! I can't believe it. I just can't believe it! The baby was so beautiful! I've never seen anything . . . ." She kept rattling on and Harry just smiled. Girls loved unicorns. Every girl. Even Hermione, normally very pragmatic and practical would go into rapturous ramblings if she saw a unicorn. Harry imagined it had something to do with the magic in them. He thought they were pretty, certainly, but it just wasn't the same. They walked over to his broom, Cassie continuing to discuss each detail of her experience, and Harry smiling patiently, not really registering what she was saying.

He interrupted her as he picked up his broom. "Shall we walk back or do you want to fly again?"



"Oh! Fly! Definitely fly!" Harry thought from her tone of voice that she would feel confident she could fly the broom herself now, if it were possible. He climbed on and she slipped on behind him, grabbing him tight around the waist. He kicked off from the ground, rising high. She stopped rattling on about the unicorns and just stared around. He flew over a new area, the forest, the lake, and then over the castle. She held him tighter as they flew over the water.

"Do you want to try a little trick flying?" They were back over solid ground again although they were still high.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean like this - hold on tight." He did a quick loop, hanging upside down for a brief second.

"Aaaah! Yes! That was incredible!" At the excitement in her voice, Harry did another quick maneuver and she gasped. He spent about 20 minutes doing some rather tricky moves, nothing super scary, but interesting enough that she kept exclaiming in pleasure as he put the Firebolt through its paces. Finally, he decided their time was up. He landed gently on the lawn in front of the castle and they both climbed off. Her hair was disheveled and her cheeks were pink from the wind. "Harry! I just can't thank you enough! I don't even know where to begin!"

"You don't need to thank me. It was fun for me, too. I'm glad you enjoyed it. I think we should probably head up to meet the others." As they entered the entrance hall, Colin came in and saw them.

"They turned out as well as I thought they would. Here. I kept these six and destroyed the rest." Cassie looked with complete amazement at the pictures of herself up on the broom and in with the unicorns, moving and waving. Harry handed them to her and she looked them over again.

"These are beautiful. You really are a good photographer!"

"Thanks. You're easy to . . . ."

"That's enough, Colin. She's leaving in just a few minutes." He took the pictures from Cassie and put them in his own pocket. If he could, he would give them to her. If not, he would keep them himself.

Colin raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't mean that we can't owl each other."

"Give it up, Colin. She's not available." Harry thought he was probably being a little rude, but he didn't care. All Cassie needed was to get involved with another wizard. He took Cassie firmly by the arm. "Thanks, Colin. I really appreciate it. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing, Harry. It was fun." But he looked fairly disgruntled as Harry and Cassie ascended the stairs that would take them back to the gargoyle that protected the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

## Chapter 54

### Among the Muggles . . . . Again

Ginny, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the corridor, standing by the gargoyle and looking relaxed. Harry envied them. He was extremely nervous about what was going to be happening in the next few minutes. "How's Charlie doing?" Cassie asked as soon as she saw them.

"He's doing great. Pomfrey says he can probably go back to the Burrow tomorrow to finish recuperating."

"That's fantastic." Harry was very relieved. "I'll go up and visit him this afternoon and apologize again. But right now, let's get up there. Canary creams." The gargoyle hopped aside and all five of them stepped onto the magical staircase.

"Hey, didn't your brothers Fred and George invent those canary cream things?"

"Yeah," Ron laughed. "They did. Apparently Dumbledore likes them. I think he only uses names of candies that he likes as his password."

"You mean that all of his passwords are candies?"

"All that I've heard," Harry said. "And I've been coming up here since second year." Cassie shook her head.

"He seems like a really interesting person, uh, wizard, uh, . . ." And then they were there and she didn't say anything else. They all went into the office. There were more chairs now than there had been before. Cassie looked over at Fawkes' perch and gasped "What happened to Fawkes?"

"He died and then was reborn." Harry didn't blame her for being shocked. The beautiful bird she had seen yesterday was gone and instead there was an ugly little gray fuzzball.

"But how did he die? I mean he looked great when I saw him yesterday!"

"He died for me, Miss Robinson. He has a rather nasty habit of doing that. I am grateful, though, for his timely intervention." The headmaster had come in when she asked her question and answered it.

"But . . ."

"He caught the curse that Malfoy threw at him, Cassie. The killing curse. So he died." Harry tried to sound matter-of-fact, like this was not that big of a deal. Inside, though, he was wishing that they could get onto a more pleasant subject. After all, he was hoping that she would want to remember her time here and her time with him and if she was thinking about how horrible the wizarding world was and about killing curses and everything, then he wouldn't blame her if she wanted to forget it all. Cassie looked like she was going to ask another question but the door opened and two more people entered Professor Dumbledore's office. Harry wasn't surprised to see Remus, as he had been invited. But he was surprised to see Arthur Weasley. Apparently, so were Ginny and Ron.

"Dad? Is something wrong?" Ginny was instantly concerned.

"No, no. I've been invited to this meeting. Apparently Professor Dumbledore wanted my opinion on the question of what to do with a Muggle girl. . . ." Arthur scanned the small group quickly and his eyes latched onto Cassie. "You must be she. I'm Arthur Weasley." He approached her, holding out his hand and looking very much like he was sure Father Christmas had arrived early this year and she was his present.

"I'm Cassie Robinson. It's nice to meet you." Mr. Weasley smiled broadly as they shook hands but before he could say anything else, Dumbledore spoke again.

"So good of you all to come. If you would all have a seat, we can get on with the business of this meeting." Everybody sat down and looked expectantly at the headmaster. Much to Harry's relief, the

story of how Cassie actually got to Hogwarts was not discussed. He imagined that Mr. Weasley must have been filled in by Remus or something, but he was just happy he didn't have to tell the whole thing again. "Miss Robinson will be returning back to London at the conclusion of this meeting. Remus and Arthur will be taking her back." Harry saw a look of puzzlement on Cassie's face. He should have told her that there was no way he was going to be allowed off the grounds. Not now, anyway. Too dangerous. Dumbledore continued without pausing. "The question that we must address is what to do with her memory."

Now Cassie looked panicked and there were some surprised mutterings from Hermione and Ron also. Ginny didn't say anything that Harry could hear. "Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean?" Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers together, smiling kindly at her over his fingers. Harry, however, was not fooled. Dumbledore was being very thoughtful to her and polite, but Harry knew that her presence here was a serious problem. The headmaster was very concerned. Harry's stomach was in the process of doing some new acrobatic maneuvers and he consciously tried to relax. He had said he would let her decide. Harry needed to have some faith in her, too.

"Considering what you know about the wizarding world now, Miss Robinson, how do you think we manage to stay hidden from Muggles such as yourself?" Harry wondered why he was asking Cassie this question. He should just tell her the two options and let her decide. That way at least she would know. Harry fingered the photographs in his pocket.

"Um, gee. I don't know. I guess that you stay away from us, pretty much, in secret places like this castle." Dumbledore nodded.

"That can work to a certain point, but it would not be adequate if that was our only means of defense. There are hundreds of thousands of us worldwide and we live lives to a great degree among you." Harry caught his breath. Defense? It sounded almost like wizards needed to be protected from the Muggles. Personally, Harry thought it was quite the opposite. One fifth-year wizard still in school at Hogwarts could probably wipe out half the population of London if he was so inclined.

Cassie's eyes got wider at Dumbledore's statement. "Oh, well. I don't know, then. Um, do you use magic to hide or something?"

"We have several methods, but magic does definitely play a role in it." No one else seemed distressed by the way this conversation was going and Harry tried to force his breathing into a more relaxed rhythm before everyone noticed that he was practically hyperventilating. "We have rules about what sort of magic wizards can do in front of Muggles which have very strict consequences if they are disobeyed." Harry grimaced. That was true as he knew firsthand. "Also, we have a lot of charms and wards and barriers that allow us to move around without being seen when necessary. And then, truthfully, Muggles have this tendency to ignore anything that does not fit into their world view, so some things are overlooked by Muggles just because they are 'impossible.'" Cassie was nodding in agreement. "Unfortunately, once in a while, these methods fail for one reason or another and a Muggle actually sees magic being performed or a magic place or a creature that should not exist or something. This is rare, but it does happen occasionally."

"Oh. What do you then? Tell them about magic and everything?"

"No." He looked at her again and Harry knew that if he had been on the end of that gaze, he would have been squirming in his seat. He had, actually, many times. But Cassie met Dumbledore's gaze squarely and he admired her courage. "We have an ability to modify memory - to make the Muggle forget that he ever saw anything unusual at all."

"Oh." Her voice this time was very small. "Is that what you want to do to me?"

"Well. It is certainly what I had planned. It is the only way that I can see to deal with the fact that you are, honestly, a threat to us." There was that word again. Harry wanted to interrupt, to argue the logic. If anything, she was threatened by them, not the other way around. "However, Harry has argued strongly against this. He wants you to be able to remember him and Hogwarts and he has made a fairly strong point. I have decided to leave the choice to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"Oh." That was the third time she had said that. But Harry guessed all of this was a lot to try to absorb. Maybe that was why Dumbledore had told her about why they did that. Maybe it would make more sense that way. "Does it hurt? What does it do to me? What would I remember?" Harry could see that she was considering it. He wanted to stand up and argue with her, but Dumbledore's blue eyes passed over him and he stayed in his seat.

"It does not hurt. You would be confused, slightly, a little disoriented, perhaps for as long as a few days, kind of feeling a little dazed. We would erase the memory of your ever meeting Harry at all from your mind. Remus would take you home and then perform the charm and then you would simply go back to your life."

Cassie's eyes flew up and met Harry's. She was obviously very nervous. She was chewing on her bottom lip in the way she did when she was thinking hard. "If I didn't want you to do that to me, what is my other choice? Would you kill me or something?" Ron laughed out loud but no one else did and Harry saw out of the corner of his eye that Hermione shot him a scowl. Harry felt stricken. Did she really think they would ever do that to her? But it was obvious that she did. She was very pale and now looked terrified.

"No, no. Nothing like that. We would just insist that you promise that you will tell no one of . . . our existence."

"That's it?" She was incredulous. "I promise and then I go home and . . ."

"There's a little more to it than that." She looked deflated and Harry felt that way, too. He had thought that was the other choice. Memory modification or nothing. "I want you to think very carefully. If you choose to remember Harry, then you will also remember last night and all the things leading up to it. And I think it was quite disturbing to you."

"Oh, yeah. So I would forget all the bad things, too, wouldn't I?"

"Yes. Plus, you wouldn't feel like you knew a big secret that you could never tell anyone. It is not that easy to keep such things from those we love. From what Harry has told me about your experience together, he had a very hard time avoiding telling you himself and that was only for a little more than three weeks." Harry had never thought of that. It would be difficult for her not to ever mention anything about all the things she had seen and done. Maybe he was asking too much of her.

"But if I ever told anyone, they would just think I was nutters and ignore me completely." She sounded confident about this.

"You may be unpleasantly surprised to find that this is not true, Miss Robinson. For sometime, somewhere, you would meet someone who knew you were telling the truth and then things can get very complicated. Miss Granger, could you explain your experiences with this, please?"

Hermione cleared her throat and Harry wondered what she was going to say. "Yes, well. It was the summer after second year. I was at a camp-out with my second cousins. And I kind of messed up, really badly. I'm actually lucky I didn't get expelled." She blushed as Harry and Ron looked at her in shock. Harry knew he had never had any idea anything had happened that summer. Ginny didn't look even vaguely surprised so Harry thought she must have already heard the story. "You know my family are Muggles, completely, as far back as you can go, I think. But, at least my parents know I'm magic and they don't mind. So I can talk to them about things, but I have to be very careful about talking to anybody else. You wouldn't even have that, Cassie, I think . . . Oh, sorry. Back to the story. It was late and the little kids wanted to hear a horror story. For some reason, they all think I know a lot of scary stories, so they always have me tell them." Harry thought to himself that they must have good instincts. She could probably have told them stories that would have curled all the kids' hair just from that year alone. But he didn't say anything.



"Anyway, so I was trying to think of something original, and I started talking about a girl with an enchanted diary and how the diary started controlling her, and . . . well, you don't need to hear all the details. I basically told the story about Ginny and the basilisk. They were plenty scared, all right, but they all loved the story and I figured I was safe because none of them would ever connect that story to a dark wizard. Why would they?" She took a deep breath and started twisting her hands together in a way that reminded Harry of Cassie the night before they had come to Hogwarts. "Well, I had one cousin who went home and told what he could remember of the story to his friends and one of them has a sister who had just gotten her Hogwarts letter and so they had heard a little about what had happened -- not everything but some. It turns out that the whole family is full of wizards. Even this little friend is a wizard, I guess, although of course, he was too young to go to school or anything." She took another deep breath and continued. "So, the friend told my cousin that this wasn't a made-up story, that it was true and, of course, he embellished the whole thing. It scared my cousin to death. He told his mom and she started telling the story to all her friends as an example of what cute imaginations kids have and pretty soon the whole town where she lived was talking about the diary and then they were taking their kids to counselors to stop them having nightmares. Then a Death Eater found out about it and thought the diary was still around and went to get it and almost killed a whole Muggle family to force them to give it to him and . . . well, it was only timely intervention by the Ministry and a lot of memory charms that saved the whole town from practically imploding." Harry heard Hermione's voice break and she wiped quickly at her eyes. "My mum was so mad at me that she almost forbid me from coming back here. Plus, I hadn't really told her the whole story about what had happened and then, of course, she knew and it scared her that I had been in such danger and not told her and that made her even more mad. It was just a mess, a huge mess."

Dumbledore didn't say anything for a long minute and neither did Cassie. Harry wanted to say something, and he opened his mouth to argue that there was a huge difference between Hermione and Cassie's situations, but then Hermione spoke again. "Anyway, Cassie. I think you should have the charm. Then you'll never have to worry. Even if you remember vague snatches once in a while, you'll just

think you dreamed it and there won't be sharp details or anything." Cassie nodded and Harry's stomach sank to his toes.

"Thank you, Hermione. I value your opinion. Harry, I know what you think. Does anyone else have any ideas?" Cassie looked at Ginny, who to Harry's surprise flushed a little.

"I . . . I don't know."

Ron spoke up. "I think you shouldn't have the charm. After all, you've only been here for a few hours. You won't have that much to try to avoid talking about." Ron sometimes could be very smart, thought Harry.

"I think you should have the charm, Cassie." That was Remus and Harry felt a small stab of annoyance like his best friend was betraying him.

"Personally," said Arthur, and Harry almost stood up and cheered after he was done, "I think that Cassie should retain her memories. She seems like a reasonable girl and she will be cautious. I vote against the charm."

"So, that's three against the charm and three for the charm." Of course, Hermione would figure that out. "Ginny, I think you should put in your opinion."

She flushed again. "No. I can't. I can't be objective about it. It wouldn't be fair." Harry had no clue what Ginny was talking about. What did she mean? Cassie, however, looked like she knew what she was saying because she got a strange look on her face.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Ginny." Cassie stammered. Harry was still confused. He would have to ask Ginny later. "I guess it's up to me, then, to decide."

"It always was. We are just offering you our opinions."

"Um, this sounds kind of stupid, but can I have a piece of paper and a pen? I'd like to make a list - kind of like a pro and con list. Is that

okay?" Dumbledore nodded at Cassie's request and quickly conjured up a piece of parchment and a quill and bottle of ink. Then, when he saw the look of dismay on her face, he smiled and the parchment disappeared to be replaced with a regular sheet of paper and the ink and quill pen turned into a standard ball point pen.

"Sorry, Miss Robinson. That should be easier for you to use."

Cassie immediately took the paper and pen and drew a line down the middle of it. Harry really wished he could have read what she was writing, but she was too far away. So instead, he watched her, trying to judge by her expression what she was thinking. She would write frantically for a few minutes and then re-read what she had written and then think for a little bit, gnawing on her lower lip. Then she would write more and then think. This went on for quite some time. Harry was thinking that they would still be in this office when bedtime rolled around. But eventually, she put the pen down and looked over the list for what looked to Harry like the final time. She folded it neatly and looked up into Dumbledore's face.

"I appreciate your faith in me, sir. I have decided that I prefer to remember what I have seen and learned. I don't want Mr. Lupin to do the, uh, charm on me."

"Ah. You are quite certain?"

"Yes. Positive." But her voice wavered and Harry knew that the decision was not easy for her. He supposed it wouldn't have been for him either.

"Very well, then. You know that you will always have friends here. Perhaps the day will come when you can help us again and maybe we can help you."

"Perhaps." She didn't sound too positive right now. Harry imagined she was having second thoughts, because she touched the paper again and then seemed to steel herself and walked away from the desk. "I guess this is good-bye then."

"Yes, the sooner that you get back home, the better. Remus and Arthur will take you with a portkey. I think it would be best to have them take you a bit away from your house and I have prepared the portkey already." Harry looked down at the object Dumbledore held in his hand. It was the lion paperweight again.

"Sir, I . . . This is embarrassing, but I need my purse. It's up in the dorm room where I slept."

"I imagined you would want your personal items. I had a house elf bring them over earlier." He handed a small bag to Cassie. She looked in it quickly, reached inside and handed Harry back his T-shirt.

"This is yours."

"Oh, thanks." He took it, unsure if he should let her keep it. But truthfully, he wanted to remember that day and this was his only souvenir.

"I guess I'm ready." Then she walked over and hugged Hermione. "It's been so wonderful to meet you. Thanks for everything."

"I feel the same." Hermione handed her a slip of paper. "That's my parents' phone number. If you ever really need to talk to them, you can call." Cassie smiled and tucked the paper into her bag.

"Ron." She hugged him really fast and Harry laughed at the expression on Ron's face.

"Ginny." The two girls hugged for a long minute. "I . . . You're really wonderful. I'm so glad that Harry . . . ." Harry couldn't hear anymore of what she said but by the time Cassie stood in front of him, she was crying. Ginny was wiping her eyes, also.

"Harry James Potter." He pulled the pictures out of his pocket and handed them to her. She smiled, obviously thrilled at the gift. Harry half expected someone to reach out and snatch them out of her hand but no one had noticed, apparently, because no one said anything as she slipped them into her pocket. He wanted to say something profound to her but he couldn't get any words out around the lump in

his throat. She spoke instead. "You take care of yourself, okay? I'm so glad I met you. Promise me you won't let anyone . . . won't get . . . Just promise me you'll keep flying." She hugged him then and he let his arms curve around her back. He closed his eyes, smelling her perfume and trying not to cry, also. It would just be too embarrassing. Then, at the last minute, he remembered what he wanted to tell her.

"I've got an owl, Cassie."

"You do?" She sounded like she was a little confused about what this had to do with her going home, but Harry persisted.

"Yeah. Her name is Hedwig and she's snow white. I can send you mail, okay? And you can send some back to me with her. I want you to write me and tell me how things are going."

"So, a white owl will . . ."

"She'll tap on your window and want to be let in. So if you ever see a white owl in the daytime, let her in, okay? She'll be from me." Cassie smiled in response although she looked a little overwhelmed at the idea and Harry felt much better.

"Come on, Cassie. We'd better go." Remus said again. Harry should be grateful that he had people as fantastic as Remus and Arthur to take her back, but he felt a little jealous that they were going to get to spend more time with her. Then Ginny was standing next to him and he slipped his arms around her. His place was here. And Cassie's wasn't.

"Yes," said Arthur. "We'd better get you back among the Muggles again." And then there was a watery smile and she was gone.

Harry stared for a long time at the spot where she had stood. Ron and Hermione headed out of the office and Harry and Ginny were about to follow when he noticed the folded piece of paper on Dumbledore's desk. He picked it up, pulling Ginny by the hand carefully over to where he stood.

"Is it okay if I look at this, sir?"

"Well, I imagine that if she felt it was confidential, she would not have left it. Feel free. I will be heading down to lunch." Harry opened the paper and saw the familiar handwriting. He read the list carefully with Ginny looking over his shoulder.

He was surprised by it because it was not what he expected, not at all.

She had made two columns. One was titled: Things I wish I could forget. The other was titled: Things I need to remember.

Harry read the "forget" list first and shook his head. She really was an amazing girl. Her list went like this:

There are really evil people in this world.

There are things all around us that we don't know anything about.

Some people get a thrill out of making other people hurt.

What someone looks like when they've been shot with a very big arrow.

What someone looks like when they've been cursed.

How it feels to be completely out of place.

Werewolves aren't liked or trusted even when they're good.

Elves are slaves.

Dragons.

There is such a thing as a killing curse. And it works.

Sometimes love hurts, a lot.

He almost was afraid to look at the other side of the paper, but he finally did. It had similar items on it and it went like this:

There is such a thing as magic.

Flying on a broom is better than anything.

There are things all around us that we don't know anything about.

Invisibility cloaks.

Unicorns.

Harry.

Hermione.

Ginny.

Ron.

There are things like giants and centaurs and werewolves and elves.

I tried pumpkin juice and it was good.

Sometimes love hurts, a lot. It's worth it.

There's evil in the world and there are people who are willing to die to fight it. I need to be one of them.

Harry folded the paper again and pulled his wand out. The paper turned to ash as the blue flame consumed it. He smiled at Ginny and she smiled back at him. "She was wonderful, Harry. In the short amount of time we were together, I really got to like her. But, I. . . I didn't want her to remember you. I was afraid you would love her more than you love me. I was wrong, though. I'm glad that she's going to remember us."

Harry bit his lip, thinking for a minute. Then he bent down and kissed Ginny. "I do really love you, you know. It just took being away from you for a while to realize how much. Come on, I'm starving and if we don't hurry, we're going to miss lunch."